Asylum

By: Evilharlowe

Ilya Rozanov has a Stanley Cup, a dog with anxiety, and a husband who organizes spice racks by cuisine. What he doesn't have is Canadian citizenship. When a politically motivated challenge threatens his immigration case, the life he and Shane built in Ottawa becomes the thing he has to prove — to a government that wants documents, a public that wants scandal, and a country he chose for the only reason that mattered.

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Ilya

Chapter 1: Ilya

The suit was Italian. Charcoal, single-breasted, cut close through the shoulders because Ilya had paid someone in Milan to make sure of it. He had worn it to the NHL Awards two years ago and Shane had looked at him across the table at the Bellagio and said nothing, which was how Shane communicated that something had made a significant impression.

Ilya was standing in their bedroom looking at himself in the mirror and not liking what he saw. Six-three, light brown curls that wouldn't lie flat no matter what he did to them, hazel eyes that looked like they belonged on a cologne ad and not on a man about to sit in a government office.

Not the suit. The suit was perfect. The problem was the man inside it, who could not get his hands to stop moving. He adjusted the cuffs. He adjusted the collar. He touched the knot of his tie and untouched it and touched it again and it looked exactly the same every time because Ilya Rozanov could tie a Windsor knot in the dark after fifteen years of post-game press conferences, and his hands knew this, but his hands were not listening to his brain this morning. His mother's gold cross hung against his sternum under the dress shirt, where it always was.

From the kitchen, he could hear Shane. Cabinet opening, cabinet closing. The coffee maker. The sequence of sounds that meant Shane was packing a bag: protein bars, water bottles, the folder. The folder had been on the kitchen island for a week, growing thicker. Ilya had watched Shane add to it every night. Printouts, photocopies, a timeline written in Shane's precise handwriting on graph paper, because Shane Hollander did not use lined paper when graph paper existed.

Anya was sitting on Ilya's left foot.

She had been sitting on his left foot since he'd come out of the shower. Fifteen pounds of terrier-shepherd mix with enormous brown eyes and an anxiety disorder that put most humans to shame. She was leaning against his calf and looking up at him with an expression that said: *something is wrong and I have identified that you are the source and I will not be moving.*

"I'm fine," Ilya told her.

Anya did not believe him.

"Ilya." Shane appeared in the bedroom doorway. He was wearing his navy suit, the one Yuna had picked out for his first press conference in Ottawa. His black hair was combed, parted with the precision of a man who owned three different combs. His shoes were polished. He was four inches shorter than Ilya and looked like a man who had been ready for this appointment since the day it was scheduled, which he had been, because Shane Hollander did not leave things to the last minute. Shane Hollander had a folder.

"Your tie is fine," Shane said.

"I know."

"Then stop touching it."

"I'm not touching it."

"You've touched it eleven times since I walked in here."

"You were counting?"

"I'm always counting." Shane crossed the room and took Ilya's hands away from his collar and held them. Ilya's hands were warm and Shane's were cool and dry and steady, the way they always were before something important. Shane Hollander's hands did not shake. They never had. Not before Game 7s, not before press conferences,

not before he'd walked into the Montreal locker room for the last time and cleaned out his stall while twenty-two men who'd been his teammates for a decade pretended he wasn't there.

"Breathe," Shane said.

"I am breathing."

"You're breathing like you're about to take a face-off."

"Maybe I am. Maybe this is face-off."

"It's a meeting. Melinda will be there. We have every document they could possibly ask for. We have two joint tax returns, your individual returns from before we were married, two mortgages, and a dog."

"They cannot ask the dog anything. She has anxiety."

"She gets it from you."

"She gets it from both of us, Hollander. This house is not calm."

The corner of Shane's mouth twitched. Ilya saw it, and that was enough.

"We're leaving in twenty minutes," Shane said. "Eat something."

"I'm not hungry."

"Eat something anyway. You're not sitting in a federal office with low blood sugar and your accent getting thicker every time someone asks you a question."

"My accent does not get thicker."

"Your accent gets thicker when you're nervous, when you're angry, and when you're trying to be charming. Today you'll be all three. Eat a protein bar."

Ilya looked at him. Shane looked back. Shane was doing the thing he did when he decided that someone he loved needed managing — not the anxious, controlling version, not the one that came out when things were spiraling, but the steady version.

The version that had packed the folder and polished his shoes and would drive them to the IRCC office and sit beside Ilya in whatever beige government room they were put in and answer every question with the calm, factual precision of a man who had been preparing for this his entire life, even though he hadn't.

Even though six years ago Shane Hollander couldn't say the word *boyfriend* out loud without looking like he wanted to disappear.

"Okay," Ilya said. "Protein bar."

"And water."

"And water. Anything else, coach?"

"Don't call the immigration officer 'sweetheart.'"

"I only call you sweetheart."

"And the old lady at the café on Elgin."

"She is also sweetheart. She gives me extra foam."

Shane handed him a protein bar from the nightstand. Because there were always protein bars in the nightstand.

Because this was Shane Hollander's house and in Shane Hollander's house there were protein bars in the nightstand and Lysol wipes under every sink and the spice rack was organized by cuisine and then alphabetically within cuisine and the man Ilya had loved since he was nineteen years old had built a world where everything was in its place, and Ilya's place was here, in this bedroom, in this suit, eating this protein bar, and today they were

going to walk into a government office and lay one more stone in the road toward citizenship.

Anya followed him to the kitchen, her nails clicking on the hardwood. Ilya ate the protein bar standing at the island while Shane checked the folder one more time. Shane flipped through it with the focus of a man reviewing game tape. Ilya watched his hands. Quick, precise, turning pages without hesitation because he knew where everything was.

"Marriage certificate," Shane said, not to Ilya but to the folder. "Joint tax returns, individual returns, joint account statements, mortgage, insurance beneficiaries, physical presence log, photos — "

"Did you include the one from the wedding where your mother is crying?"

"I included twelve photos. Melinda said twelve was enough."

"And the spreadsheet? The one where you counted every day I have been in Canada?"

Shane didn't look up. "It's organized by month. Days in Canada, days on road trips to the US, running total. Color-coded."

"Of course it is color-coded."

"Green means the day counts. Yellow means half-credit from before you had PR. Red means out of country."

"And how many green days do I have, Hollander?"

"Not enough. Not yet." Shane turned another page in the folder. "That's why we're doing this now."

"Your mother would say twelve pictures are not enough. Your mother would bring a projector."

"My mother is not coming to the immigration office."

"She offered."

"She offered to come, bring my father, and quote — 'make sure those people understand who they're dealing with.' That is not what we need today."

"I don't know. Could be effective. Your mother is scary woman."

"My mother is five-four."

"Scariest five-four in Ottawa."

Shane closed the folder. He looked at Ilya and Ilya could see the thing underneath the calm, the thing Shane was managing with the folder and the suit and the schedule. Shane was afraid. Not of the meeting. Shane could handle meetings, Shane could handle bureaucracy, Shane had once sat through a seven-hour arbitration hearing with the Montreal front office without flinching.

Shane was afraid because this was one piece of something larger, something with no trade deadline and no arbitration clause, and every piece had to be right because the day Ilya finally had enough days and filed for citizenship, there could be no flags, no gaps, no unanswered questions sitting in a file somewhere on Laurier Avenue.

"Hey," Ilya said. He put down the protein bar and pulled Shane in by the lapels of the navy suit. Shane came. He always came. Ilya pressed his forehead to Shane's and held him there.

"It's going to be fine," Ilya said.

"I know."

"Melinda knows what she's doing."

"I know."

"And I am very charming."

"You're moderately charming."

"I am extremely charming. Ten-time All-Star, Stanley Cup champion, and most charming man in the NHL. This is on Wikipedia."

"It's not on Wikipedia."

"It should be. You should edit it. You are good with computers."

Shane exhaled. Close enough to a laugh for Ilya.

"Twenty minutes," Shane said.

"Twenty minutes."

Shane picked up the folder. Ilya picked up Anya, who had been sitting on his foot again, and kissed the top of her head. He set her down on her bed in the living room and crouched in front of her.

"We will be back in few hours," he told her in Russian, because he always spoke to Anya in Russian. "Do not eat the couch. Do not eat the remote. Do not eat Shane's shoes. If you eat Shane's shoes, I cannot protect you."

Anya looked at him with her enormous brown eyes.

"I know," Ilya said. "I'm nervous too."

He stood. He straightened his tie one more time. Shane was waiting by the door with the folder and the car keys and the same face he wore before playoff games. Focused, locked in, ready.

Ilya walked to him. They walked out together.

The IRCC office in Ottawa was on Laurier Avenue, in a building that looked like every other federal building in the city. Limestone, glass, the blandness of architecture designed by committee. Melinda Sotto was waiting for them in the lobby.

She was shorter than both of them, which was true of most people but especially true of Ilya, who was six-three in shoes. Forty-five, black hair in a clean bun, reading glasses pushed up on her head. She was wearing a charcoal blazer that was probably as expensive as Ilya's suit but communicated something different — his said *I am someone*, hers said *I am someone who wins.*

"Good morning," she said. "How are we feeling?"

"Ready," Shane said.

"Nervous," Ilya said.

"Good. Nervous means you're taking it seriously." Melinda adjusted her glasses. "Quick review. The officer is going to ask standard questions about your relationship — timeline, cohabitation, finances. They may also ask about the publicity around your marriage. There were some media reports questioning whether — "

"Whether it's real," Ilya said.

"Whether it was entered into for immigration purposes. That's the language they'll use. I want you to answer honestly and specifically. Not 'we've been together a long time.' Give them dates, places, details. The more concrete, the better."

"Sixteen years," Shane said. "Started in 2008. World Juniors."

"Not officially," Ilya said.

"What do you mean, not officially?"

"We did not start at World Juniors. At World Juniors you hated me."

"I didn't hate you."

"You did not even think of me once in six months after Regina."

"That's not the same as hating you."

"Gentlemen," Melinda said. "Save it for the officer. That's exactly the kind of thing they want to hear."

She led them through security, past a waiting area with plastic chairs and a water cooler and a television mounted to the wall showing CBC News on mute, and down a hallway to a door marked INTERVIEW ROOM 3.

Inside: a table, four chairs, fluorescent lights, a window with the blinds half-drawn. A man was already seated, a file open in front of him. Fifties, thinning gray hair combed back, reading glasses low on his nose. He had the look of someone who'd been doing this job long enough that the room had stopped bothering him — the fluorescent hum, the plastic chairs, the nervous people sitting across from him with folders full of proof that their lives were real.

"Mr. Rozanov, Mr. Hollander. I'm Terence Bruneau, immigration officer assigned to your file. Please sit."

They sat. Melinda opened her briefcase. Shane set the folder on the table. Terence Bruneau looked at the folder and then at Shane and then at Ilya and Ilya had the sudden, irrational thought that this man could see through his suit, through his skin, through the performance he'd been running since he was eighteen, and could see the kid from Moscow who'd gotten on a plane and never really gone home.

"Mr. Rozanov, I understand your counsel has requested this meeting to discuss the status of your permanent residency and to lay some groundwork ahead of a future citizenship application. This isn't a formal proceeding — I'll be asking some questions about your relationship with Mr. Hollander and your establishment in Canada so we can identify any concerns early. Ms. Sotto, you're here as counsel?"

"I am."

"All right. Let's begin." Terence Bruneau clicked his pen. "Mr. Rozanov. When did you first meet Mr. Hollander?"

"December 2008. World Juniors. Regina."

"And when did your romantic relationship begin?"

Ilya looked at Shane. Shane looked at Ilya. This was a question they'd never had to answer in a government office before. They'd answered it for each other, late at night, in hotel rooms and at the cottage, the ongoing negotiation of when did this start that couples who'd been together for over a decade never fully resolved.

"Depends on how you define it," Ilya said. "First time we — " He glanced at Melinda. "First time things became physical, July 2010. We were filming a commercial together in — " He looked at Shane.

"Toronto," Shane said. "CCM endorsement shoot."

"Toronto," Ilya confirmed. "We were nineteen."

Terence Bruneau wrote something. "And when did you begin cohabiting?"

"Full-time, when Shane signed with Ottawa. 2021."

"But before that," Shane said. "We spent summers together. At my cottage outside Ottawa. Starting in 2017."

"Every summer," Ilya said.

"Why did you not cohabit full-time before that?"

"Because I played for the Boston Bears and Shane played for the Montreal Voyageurs. Different teams. Different cities. And we were not out."

"Not out," Terence Bruneau repeated, writing.

"Not publicly acknowledging our relationship. To anyone. For eight years."

The pen stopped. Terence Bruneau looked up. "Eight years."

"Yes."

"Can you explain why?"

Ilya felt the suit get heavier. This was the question underneath all the questions. This was the room where he was supposed to unspool a decade of hiding and lay it flat on a government table under fluorescent lights and say: *because I am Russian and Russia would have destroyed me. Because Shane's league was not ready. Because we were afraid. Because we were right to be afraid.*

"I am Russian," Ilya said. "In Russia, there are laws against — " He paused. The English that was usually adequate, usually more than adequate, the English that had charmed press conferences and talk show hosts and the grandmother on Elgin Street, was failing him. Not the vocabulary. The willingness. "Against being who I am. Openly. These laws are serious. Prison. Fines. Harassment of my family. My parents are dead. My brother is still in Russia and we don't speak, but he is still — " He stopped. "He is still my brother."

Melinda's hand was steady on the table. Shane was looking at him and Ilya could feel Shane's entire body generating the specific frequency of *I am here I am here I am here* that had gotten them through eight years of hiding.

"And in professional hockey," Ilya continued, "being gay is — it was not safe. For either of us. Shane was treated very badly by his team in Montreal when we were discovered. He had been with them ten years."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Terence Bruneau said. It was the first thing he'd said that wasn't procedural.

"So we hid," Ilya said. "For years. Hotel rooms. The cottage in summer. We hid because the alternative was losing everything — careers, safety, family. And then we were outed by accident and we

stopped hiding. And I realized that the only thing I had been afraid of losing that actually mattered was him. And he was still here."

The room was quiet. The fluorescent lights hummed. Terence Bruneau's pen was still.

"Mr. Hollander," he said. "You corroborate this timeline?"

"Every word," Shane said. His voice was steady. His hands were flat on the table. "Ilya is the most honest person I know. He's also the most stubborn, the most dramatic, and the most likely to call the immigration officer by his first name halfway through the interview, but he is not a liar and this marriage is not a stunt."

Melinda closed her eyes briefly. Ilya could see her recalculating.

"There have been media reports," Terence Bruneau said, flipping to a page in his file, "suggesting that this marriage was arranged to facilitate Mr. Rozanov's immigration status. A number of sports commentators and public figures have questioned whether — "

"I married Shane Hollander because I have been in love with him since I was nineteen years old," Ilya said. "I did not need to marry him to play hockey in Canada. I had a work permit. I had a contract. I could have stayed on a work permit forever and played hockey and been fine, on paper. I married him because he is my home. Not Ottawa. Not Canada. *Him*. Canada is where he is, so Canada is where I want to be. That is not a stunt. That is a life."

Terence Bruneau looked at him for a long moment. Then he looked at Shane. Then he wrote something in his file and turned the page.

"Let's continue," he said. "Can you tell me about your shared finances?"

The rest of the interview lasted forty-five minutes. Shane answered questions about their mortgage, their joint accounts, their insurance policies. Ilya answered questions about his NHL contract, his tax

filings, his travel schedule. They both answered questions about their daily routine, their families, their plans for the future. Shane produced documents from the folder with the efficiency of a man who had organized them by category and then by date. Ilya told Terence Bruneau about the spice rack.

"He organizes it by cuisine," Ilya said. "And then alphabetically within the cuisine. If you move the cumin, he will know. He will know and he will find you."

"That's not — I don't — " Shane looked at Melinda. "Is this relevant?"

"It's relevant," Terence Bruneau said, and Ilya thought he saw the corner of his mouth move.

At the end, Terence Bruneau closed his file. He removed his reading glasses and set them on the table and looked at both of them.

"Thank you, Mr. Rozanov, Mr. Hollander. I have everything I need for today. Ms. Sotto, my office will be in contact with your firm regarding next steps."

"Thank you, Mr. Bruneau," Melinda said.

They stood. Hands were shaken. They walked down the hallway past the plastic chairs and the water cooler and the muted CBC News and through security and out the glass doors into Ottawa in June.

The sun was out. It was twenty-two degrees and there was a breeze coming off the river and the city smelled like cut grass and coffee and the limestone warmth that Ottawa got in early summer. Ilya stood on the sidewalk and breathed.

"Well," Melinda said. She was putting her sunglasses on. "That went well."

"Define well," Shane said.

"He didn't flag anything. He didn't request additional documentation. He didn't schedule a follow-up. And he smiled at the spice rack answer."

"He did not smile," Shane said.

"He absolutely smiled," Ilya said.

"Immigration officers don't smile."

"This one smiled. I have very good instincts about people. This is well known."

"Your instincts told you to call a federal officer by his first name halfway through the meeting."

"I called him Terence. This is respectful. Terence is a distinguished name."

Melinda looked at both of them with the expression of a woman who had two boys at home and was used to this.

"I'll call you when I hear from their office. Probably two to three weeks. Go home. Celebrate. You did good." She shook their hands. "Both of you."

She walked to her car. Ilya and Shane stood on the sidewalk on Laurier Avenue in the sun.

"We did good," Ilya said.

"We did."

"I told you I was charming."

"You told a federal immigration officer about our spice rack."

"And he loved it."

Shane looked at him. The sun caught the freckles across his nose and cheekbones, the ones that had undone Ilya in a hotel gym in Los Angeles when they were eighteen. His dark eyes had gone still in that way they did when Shane Hollander's operating system needed a moment to catch up with Shane Hollander's heart.

"Let's go home," Shane said.

Ilya took his hand. Right there on Laurier Avenue, in front of the IRCC building, in front of the limestone and the glass and the Canadian flags, Ilya Rozanov took Shane Hollander's hand and they walked to the car.

It was a good day. The groundwork was solid. The path was clearing.

They went home. Anya had not eaten the couch. She had, however, been gnawing on one of Shane's shoes.

"I told her not to," Ilya said. "In Russian. She understood."

"Clearly she didn't."

"She understood. She chose defiance. This is a Russian dog."

"She's from a farm in Ontario."

"She has Russian soul. Look at her face. This is face of a dog who knows exactly what she has done and is not sorry."

Anya thumped her tail once and looked at them with her enormous brown eyes, the chewed shoe between her paws, radiating the specific energy of a fifteen-pound dog who had committed a crime and would do it again.

Shane sighed. Ilya pulled him close and kissed his temple and said, "We're going to be fine, Hollander."

And for that afternoon, in their house in Ottawa with the big backyard where they'd gotten married and the kitchen where the spice rack

stood in perfect order and the dog who had eaten a shoe and the folder on the island that had done its job, they were.

Shane

Chapter 2: Shane

Camp Rozanov — sorry, Game Changers Hockey Camp— opens for the summer. Shane organizes pylons. Ilya organizes people. Sixty-five kids hit the ice, and the whole coaching roster shows up to help.

The rink was chaos by seven forty-five.

Shane had been there since six, because six was when the Zamboni finished and the ice was clean and you could stand at center with a clipboard and map out where the pylons would go. He'd mapped it. He'd measured the distances between stations using the faceoff circles as reference points because they were regulation and therefore reliable. He'd taped down the zones — goaltending with Wyatt along the east boards, skating fundamentals with Zane at the south end, shooting clinic at center, stick handling on the west side. He'd labeled them with printed signs he'd laminated at Staples two days ago, because arena tape fades and kids can't read Sharpie from across the rink.

At seven forty-five, sixty-five children between the ages of five and sixteen arrived with their parents and the rink was chaos.

The little ones moved in packs, skittering across the rubber mats in the lobby in rental skates that were too big or too small, dragging sticks taller than they were. The teenagers slouched against the boards in clusters, performing indifference the way teenagers did, scrolling phones until someone told them to stop. Parents milled in the stands with coffee and cameras. A woman in the third row had a professional lens, which Shane noted because professional lenses meant media or something adjacent to media and the camp's media

policy was clearly printed on the waiver form and also on the banner behind the registration table.

Ilya was not here yet.

Ilya had been up since five-thirty because Shane had been up since five-thirty, and Shane was quiet in the mornings but not quiet enough for a light sleeper, and Ilya was a light sleeper when he wanted to be and a heavy sleeper when it was convenient. But Ilya had to stop for coffee at the café on Elgin because the rink coffee was, in Ilya's words, "an insult to the concept of beans," and the grandmother who worked the morning counter gave him extra foam because Ilya called her sweetheart and she thought this was wonderful.

"Hollander."

Hayden Pike was standing in the tunnel entrance with a duffel bag over one shoulder and Amber trailing behind him. She was seven and wearing a Centaurs jersey that came down to her knees with ROZANOV 81 on the back, which Ilya had given her for her birthday because Ilya gave all the Pike children Centaurs gear with his name on it specifically to irritate Hayden.

"You're early," Shane said.

"I have four children. I'm either early or catastrophically late. There is no in between." Hayden set his bag down. Amber was already gone, bolting toward the ice in sneakers with the confidence of a six-year-old who'd been on skates since she could stand. "Jackie's bringing the twins and Arthur. Arthur threw up in the car. Not because he's sick. Because he ate an entire bag of gummy bears before eight a.m. and Jackie is going to kill me because I'm the one who bought them."

"Why did you buy him an entire bag of gummy bears?"

"Because he asked nicely, Shane. He said please. He's eight. He'll never be this polite again."

Jade and Ruby Pike were eleven now and had been helping at camp since they were eight. They'd officiated the wedding. Shane still couldn't think about that without his chest doing something he didn't have a word for — the two of them standing on a step stool in the backyard, reading from index cards, Ruby stumbling over "lawfully" and Jade correcting her in a whisper that the entire wedding heard.

"Where's Rozanov?" Hayden asked.

"Coffee."

"Of course. The man is a millionaire snob and won't drink free coffee."

"The rink coffee is terrible."

"The rink coffee is fine."

"It's not fine. I'm not defending him, I'm stating a fact. The rink coffee has been the same since they installed the machine in 2019 and it tastes like someone filtered water through a parking lot."

Hayden stared at him. "You two have been married too long."

Ryan Price arrived at eight with his equipment bag and the expression of a man who still expected someone to tell him he didn't belong here. He'd been coaching at camp for five years and he still walked in like a guest.

He was big. Six-two, two-twenty, the build of a defenseman who'd spent a decade hitting people for a living. He'd retired three years ago. He was in the best shape of his life, which he attributed to Fabian and to not getting punched in the face regularly, in that order. He had a quiet voice that surprised people because they expected something louder from someone his size.

"Morning," he said to Shane. "Where do you want me?"

"Station three. Defensive positioning. I put the pylons at — "

"I'll figure it out." Ryan smiled. It was patient and slightly amused, which was his default when Shane started explaining things that didn't need explaining. "I've done this before."

"I know. I'm just — the layout is different this year. I moved the — "

"Shane." Ryan put a hand on his shoulder. Big hand. Gentle. "I'll figure it out."

Shane exhaled. "Okay."

"Go organize something. You look like you need to organize something."

By eight-thirty the coaching staff was assembled and Shane was standing behind the boards with his clipboard watching them and the thing that always happened at camp was happening: the room was becoming something.

Zane Boodram was on the ice already, skating slow loops with a cluster of eight-year-olds trailing behind him like ducklings. Zane had been with Ottawa since 2014, assistant captain, the steadiest person on the roster. He had a way of talking to kids that made them feel like he was letting them in on a secret. He'd lean down and say something quiet and the kid would nod seriously and then try whatever he'd suggested with the concentration of a surgeon.

Troy Barrett was near the far boards with Harris, who was technically here in his capacity as Senior Director of Communications but who was also taking photos of Troy with his personal phone and not being subtle about it. Troy was good with the teenagers. He was twenty-five and still close enough to their age to be credible, and he had the specific energy of a person who'd survived being closeted in professional sports and had come out the other side and wanted

every kid in this building to know that survival was possible. He didn't say this. He just was it.

Wyatt Hayes was at the goaltending station talking at full speed to a group of six-year-olds who looked like they'd been hit by a wave of enthusiasm and hadn't recovered. He was holding a blocker in one hand and gesturing with it while he explained something about angles that had somehow become an analogy about Spider-Man.

"— so the web goes here, right? And Spider-Man has to calculate the angle before he swings, same thing, same exact thing, you're Spider-Man and the puck is the building and your glove is the web and — " He caught Shane looking at him. "What? It's a good analogy."

"It's a great analogy," one of the six-year-olds said, deadly serious.

Wyatt beamed. He had the energy of a golden retriever who'd been told he was going to the park and hadn't come down from it yet. He'd been like this since Shane had known him — enormous, enthusiastic, incapable of talking about anything without his whole body getting involved. He read comics on the team bus and got genuinely upset when people called them "comic books" instead of "graphic novels" and had once spent an entire road trip to Philadelphia explaining to Ilya why the MCU had betrayed the source material, and Ilya had listened to every word because Ilya found Wyatt fascinating the way people found weather phenomena fascinating.

Scott Hunter was in the stands talking to Kip, who had a laptop open on his knees. Kip was writing a book. Shane didn't know what it was about — Kip was private about it, said only that it wasn't about hockey, which everyone assumed meant it was about hockey. Scott was leaning against the seat next to him, legs stretched out, looking like a man who'd been famous for twenty years and had finally stopped caring about what it looked like. This was his last season. He'd announced it in May. He was nearly forty and his body was

telling him things he didn't want to hear, and he'd listened, which Shane admired because Shane wasn't sure he'd be able to.

Leah Campbell and Max Riley were together near the penalty box, Leah lacing her skates while Max talked to a cluster of girls who'd gathered around them with the gravitational pull of kids who recognized representation when they saw it. Leah had two Olympic gold medals in women's hockey and a World Championship silver and the calm authority of a person who'd never had to raise her voice to fill a room. Max had two Olympic medals — one gold, one bronze, both from before he'd come out as trans, both from the women's team, and neither of which he'd ever renounced because they were his and he'd earned them. He hadn't had a professional team since transitioning. He coached. He advocated. He showed up at camps like this and stood in front of kids and existed, and the existing was the point.

A girl — maybe ten, braids, Team Canada hoodie — was asking Max a question Shane couldn't hear. Max crouched to her level and answered, and whatever he said made the girl grin and then turn to tell her friend something urgent.

Shane looked at his clipboard. Checked the schedule. Checked it again.

The door banged open and Ilya walked in carrying two coffees and radiating the energy of a man who believed punctuality was a suggestion.

"I'm here," he announced to no one and everyone. "Camp Rozanov is open."

"Game Changers Hockey Camp," Shane said.

"That is what I said."

"You said Camp Rozanov."

"What's mine is yours, babe, and this is ours." Ilya handed Shane one of the coffees. It was exactly right — black, no sugar, from the café on Elgin, still hot. Ilya always got Shane's order right. He got a lot of things right that he never acknowledged getting right, because acknowledging them would interfere with the performance of not paying attention.

"Good morning, children!" Ilya bellowed toward the ice, and sixty-five heads turned. The little ones stared. The teenagers tried not to stare and failed. "I am Ilya. Some of you know me. I play hockey, sometimes good, sometimes okay, never bad, and this is my camp. Also Shane's camp." He gestured at Shane with his coffee cup. "Shane is very organized. If you need to find something, ask Shane. If you need to have fun, ask me."

Hayden, from the far side of the rink: "If you need actual coaching, ask literally anyone else."

"Hayden Pike, everyone. He is funny. He thinks he is funnier than he is. This is common problem for short people."

"I'm five-nine!"

"In your dreams, Pike. In your dreams."

A ripple of laughter went through the kids — uncertain from the little ones, delighted from the teenagers. Shane watched Ilya scan the crowd and do the thing he did instinctively that Shane had never learned to do: read a room. Not the way Shane read rooms, which was to catalog the layout and the exits and the noise level and the number of people. The way Ilya read rooms was to find the kid who was standing apart, the one who hadn't laughed, the one who was gripping her stick too tight or hiding behind a parent or staring at the ice like it was an ocean and she'd never swum.

"Okay," Ilya said, quieter now, pitched for the kids at the front. "Here is what we do today. We skate. We shoot. We learn. We fall down, and then we get up. Some of you have never been on the ice. This is

fine. Some of you are very good. This is also fine. Nobody here is too small or too new or too anything. You are here. That is enough."

Shane heard the echo under the words — *nobody here is too small or too new or too anything* — and he knew where it came from. He knew Ilya was thinking about a twelve-year-old boy in Moscow who'd been told, not in words but in silences, that everything about him was wrong. That the thing he loved — hockey — belonged to a world that would only accept him if he performed a version of himself that didn't exist.

Ilya wasn't performing now. This was the real one.

Shane looked at his clipboard. His vision blurred for a second. He blinked it clear and checked the schedule again.

The morning moved fast.

Shane ran the shooting clinic for the first rotation and it went badly. He'd prepared a drill sequence based on release point optimization — wrist positioning, blade angle, weight transfer through the follow-through — and he'd diagrammed it on the whiteboard the night before with color-coded arrows and foot placement markers, and when he explained it to twelve children aged eight to eleven, they looked at him with the specific blankness of people who'd been given information in a language they didn't speak.

"So if you rotate your top hand here — " Shane demonstrated, moving slowly — "and keep the blade face at approximately thirty degrees — "

A boy in the front row raised his hand. "What's a degree?"

Shane paused. He opened his mouth. He closed it. The boy was maybe eight. He had a Lightning jersey on and a helmet that was slightly too big and he was asking a completely reasonable question

and Shane's brain was producing seventeen possible explanations, all of them too technical.

Zane appeared at his elbow. "Like this, bud." He took a stick and angled the blade. "You want it like a ramp. Like you're sliding a puck up a ramp. Not flat, not straight up. The middle."

"Oh," the boy said. "Like a skateboard ramp?"

"Exactly like a skateboard ramp."

The boy grinned and tried it and the puck went four feet off the ice and hit the glass and he screamed with joy and Shane stood there holding his clipboard and thinking, not for the first time, that he was a better hockey player than he was a hockey teacher, and that this gap was one of the things about himself he found hardest to accept because teaching should be the easy part — he understood the mechanics, he could do them in his sleep — but understanding something yourself and translating it for an eight-year-old who didn't know what a degree was were different skills entirely, and one of them was his and one of them wasn't.

Later, during the free skate, he found a girl sitting on the bench alone. Thirteen, maybe fourteen. She was wearing full gear but hadn't gone onto the ice. She was watching the other kids with her stick across her knees, turning it slowly.

"You okay?" Shane sat next to her, leaving a seat between them because teenagers needed space.

"I'm fine."

"You don't have to go out there."

"I know." She kept turning the stick. "I just — everyone's really good."

"Some of them are. Some of them just got on skates this year."

"The little kid in the Lightning jersey scored five times this morning."

"He did. He's eight and he has no fear. That won't last. By the time he's your age, he'll be thinking too much to shoot like that."

She looked at him. "Do you think too much?"

Shane considered this. "I think exactly the right amount. According to me. According to my husband, I think too much. According to my coach, I don't think enough. So the answer depends on who you ask."

She smiled. Small, cautious, but real.

"What's your name?"

"Maren."

"What position do you play, Maren?"

"I don't know yet."

"Good. That's the right answer at thirteen." He stood. Picked up a puck from the bucket. "Come on. I want to show you something about where your hands go on the stick. Just us. Nobody's watching."

She came. He showed her the grip — not the thirty-degree angle, not the biomechanics, just where to put her hands so the stick felt like part of her arm. She tried it. Adjusted. Tried again.

"That's it," Shane said.

"That's it?"

"That's the whole thing. Everything else is just getting comfortable with the stick being there."

She skated onto the ice. Not fast, not confident, but she went. Shane watched her until she joined a group near Leah's station, and Leah looked over and gave Shane a nod. Small. Enough.

At lunch, Shane was sitting in the stands eating a protein bar — because there were always protein bars — when he saw Melinda Sotto's husband.

Craig Stephenson was on the ice with two boys who were clearly his sons, running them through a passing drill with the easy authority of a man who'd played twelve seasons as a defenseman for the Toronto Guardians. Shane had met Craig a handful of times — charity dinners, a Guardians alumni game Shane had attended with Ilya — but hadn't connected the name on the camp registration forms with Melinda's family until the boys' first summer two years ago.

The older boy was maybe twelve. Long limbs, still growing into them, the slightly awkward coordination of a kid whose body was changing faster than his proprioception could track. He had a good shot. The younger one was nine or ten, smaller, quicker, and had the specific intensity of a kid who was trying to keep up with an older brother and knew he was losing.

Shane walked to the boards. "Stephenson."

Craig looked up. Grinned. He was tall, six-one or six-two, with the build of a retired athlete who still trained but had stopped caring about looking like he did. Brown skin, close-cropped hair, a Guardians alumni T-shirt that was faded enough to be real.

"Hollander. Hell of a setup this year."

"Your kids are registered?"

"Tyler's twelve, Casey's ten. Third summer. Melinda had them registered before the forms were even posted. She made me promise not to coach from the stands."

"And you're coaching from the ice instead."

"This isn't coaching. This is a father teaching his sons that Shane Hollander's passing drill is too complicated and they should listen to Zane instead."

Shane let that one land. "Do you want to run a station this afternoon? We could use another defenseman. Ryan's got positioning, but we don't have anyone on — "

"Checking? Puck retrieval?"

"Board work. Reading the play from the back end."

Craig looked at his boys. Looked at the ice. He had the face of a man being asked if he wanted to do the thing he loved and trying to perform like he was thinking about it.

"Yeah," he said. "I can do that."

"Tyler and Casey go to other stations. No coaching your own kids."

"Melinda told you to say that."

"Melinda didn't have to tell me. I watched you run that passing drill. You corrected Tyler's grip four times in two minutes."

Craig laughed. It was big and warm and the two boys looked over because the sound was familiar. "Four times? I thought it was three."

"It was four. I was counting."

"You're always counting. Melinda says that about you."

"People do say that." Shane leaned on the boards. "She's good. Melinda. She's — really good."

Craig's face shifted. Not much. Just enough to register that they'd moved from hockey to the thing underneath hockey — the IRCC file, the folder, the question of whether Ilya would be allowed to stay in a country he'd chosen for the only reason that mattered.

"She's the best at what she does," Craig said. "She doesn't lose."

"Good."

"I mean it, Hollander. She doesn't lose."

Shane nodded. Pushed off the boards. Went back to his clipboard.

At three o'clock, during the final scrimmage, Ilya resolved a fight between two boys by making them race backwards on one foot.

Shane watched from behind the glass. The fight had started over a tripping call that wasn't a tripping call — one boy had fallen, the other had been nearby, and at eleven years old, proximity was guilt. They'd been jawing at each other for ten minutes, escalating from trash talk to shoving, and then one of them threw a glove and Ryan had started toward them, but Ilya got there first.

He didn't raise his voice. He skated between them and stopped, hands on his hips, looking down from six-three with the amused patience of a man who'd once been pulled apart from actual NHL fights by actual NHL referees and was not impressed by two seventy-pound children shoving each other.

"What is problem?" he said.

Both boys started talking at once.

"Stop. One at a time. You." He pointed at the boy on the left.

"He tripped me!"

"I did not!" said the other.

"I said one at a time." Ilya looked at the second boy. "You will get your turn. This is how civilization works. Continue." He looked back at the first boy.

"He stuck his leg out and I fell."

"Did you fall?"

"Yes."

"Are you hurt?"

The boy considered this. "No."

"Good. You." He pointed at the second boy.

"I didn't trip him. He fell on his own because he can't stop."

Ilya looked at both of them. Then he looked at the ice, then back at the boys, then he dropped into a squat between them, which was ridiculous because he was six-three and squatting in goalie pads looked like a folding chair collapsing.

"Here is what we do. Both of you. One foot. Backwards. To the blue line. Whoever gets there first is the better player and wins this argument. If you fall, the other one wins. If you both fall, I win, and I am already the best player here, so you should try not to fall."

The boys looked at each other. The fight was already gone from their faces, replaced by the competitive instinct that had started the fight in the first place, redirected.

"Ready?"

They raced. One of them made it to the blue line. The other fell at the hashmarks and slid into the boards laughing.

Ilya pulled him up. "Good try. Work on your edges. Both of you, shake hands."

They shook hands. They went back to the scrimmage. Ilya skated past Shane and raised his eyebrows, performing nonchalance, as

though he hadn't just done in thirty seconds what would have taken Shane ten minutes of explanation and a written incident report.

"Show-off," Shane said through the glass.

Ilya blew him a kiss. In front of sixty-five kids, their parents, and eight coaches. Because Ilya Rozanov had never once in his life experienced the emotion of embarrassment, and Shane Hollander had experienced enough of it for both of them.

There was a moment at the end of the day.

The kids were filtering out. Parents collecting gear bags and water bottles, calling names across the lobby. The rink was emptying, getting quieter, and Shane was at the registration table organizing the sign-out sheets when he saw Ilya standing alone near the Irina Foundation banner.

The banner was the same one they'd used since the first camp. White background, the foundation logo in navy, and under it: *In memory of Irina Rozanova. Because everyone deserves to be okay.*

Ilya was just standing there. Not reading it — he knew what it said. Not posing — there was no one watching, or he thought there was no one watching. He was looking at it the way he sometimes looked at old photographs of his mother, the few he had, the few Grigori hadn't thrown away. Not with sadness, exactly. With the expression of a man trying to keep a face in focus that was slipping further away every year.

He touched the cross at his sternum. Shane saw his thumb press against it through his shirt, the unconscious gesture that meant Ilya was with her, wherever she was.

Shane didn't go to him. There were things that belonged to Ilya and his mother and nobody else, not even the person Ilya had chosen. Shane understood this. He understood that love was not the same

as access, that marriage did not mean every door was open, that some rooms in the people you loved had been locked before you arrived and would stay locked, and the best thing you could do was stand in the hallway and make sure they knew you were there.

Ilya turned away from the banner. He saw Shane watching and his face changed — not a smile, but the thing his face did when it was rearranging itself from private to present, from Ilya-alone to Ilya-with-Shane. The curls, the hazel eyes, the lopsided mouth. The man who'd stood in a government office three weeks ago and said *he is my home*.

"Good day," Ilya said.

"Good day," Shane agreed.

They packed up the equipment together. Counted pylons. Shane counted the pylons twice because the first count had been twenty-three and there should have been twenty-four, and after three minutes of searching, Ilya found the twenty-fourth behind the penalty box where a five-year-old had apparently stashed it for reasons known only to the five-year-old.

Home.

Anya met them at the door with her full body, pressing against their legs, turning in tight circles, communicating through the medium of physical contact that she had been abandoned for nine hours and this was unacceptable and also she loved them and also she had not eaten the couch.

She had, however, knocked over a plant.

"Not the fiddle leaf," Shane said.

It was the fiddle leaf. Dirt on the hardwood, the pot on its side, the plant itself looking disheveled and offended.

"I will fix," Ilya said.

"You can't fix a — "

"I will fix." He was already repotting it, scooping dirt with his hands, talking to the plant in Russian. He talked to plants the way he talked to Anya — full sentences, reasonable tone, as though the plant was simply a Russian-speaking entity that had made a bad choice and needed to hear about it.

Shane cleaned the floor. Then he showered. When he came back to the kitchen, Ilya was cooking.

This was one of the things. One of the things that Shane wouldn't have predicted, fifteen years ago, when Ilya Rozanov was the loudest person in every room and ate whatever he wanted and treated his body like a machine that ran on talent and arrogance.

Ilya cooked. Not performatively, not as a hobby he talked about — he just cooked. He made the food he'd grown up eating, the food Irina had made before everything went dark, and some of it Shane could name and some of it Shane was still learning to name, and all of it was good.

Tonight it was pelmeni — Russian dumplings, handmade, because Ilya made the dough from scratch. He had flour on his forearms. He was pressing the edges of small circles of dough around spoonfuls of filling — pork and onion and something else, something he wouldn't tell Shane because "you will Google it and then you will tell me I am doing it wrong and I am not doing it wrong, I am doing it how my mother did it."

Chicken was in the oven. The smell of it — rosemary, garlic, butter — filled the kitchen. A salad sat on the counter, assembled but not dressed. Brown rice on the stove, the lid slightly ajar because Ilya insisted the lid had to be slightly ajar or the rice would "become paste, Hollander, and paste is not food."

Shane sat at the island and watched him. Ilya moved around the kitchen the way he moved on the ice — economical, intuitive, never looking at what his hands were doing because his hands already knew.

"It was good day," Shane said again.

"You already said this, Ice Cube."

"I'm saying it again. It was a good day."

Ilya smiled. Not the press-conference smile, not the chirping-Hayden smile. The one that was just for here, for this kitchen, for the person sitting at the island watching him make dumplings.

"The girl," Ilya said. "Maren. The one who was sitting on the bench."

"You saw that?"

"I see everything, Hollander. She went to Leah's station after you talked to her."

"She just needed someone to show her where to put her hands."

"You are good at this."

"I'm terrible at this. I tried to explain thirty-degree blade angles to eight-year-olds."

"You are terrible at groups. You are very good with one person. This is because you care too much to be casual, and casual is what groups need. One person, you can focus. One person, you can see."

Shane didn't say anything. He watched Ilya's hands close another dumpling.

"Craig Stephenson is running a station tomorrow," Shane said.

"Good. He was a good player."

"His kids are good."

"Melinda's kids," Ilya said, and Shane heard the slight shift in his voice — the recognition that the woman who held their immigration file in her hands had children who wore hockey gear and fought with their brothers and lined up for drills like every other kid on the ice. That the professional and the personal were not separate countries.

"She doesn't lose," Shane said.

"Who told you this?"

"Craig."

Ilya nodded. He dropped pelmeni into boiling water and watched them sink and rise. "Good."

They ate at the table. Not the island — Ilya insisted on the table when he cooked, because "I did not make this food for you to eat it like a horse standing at a trough." The pelmeni were perfect. The chicken was falling off the bone. The salad had cucumbers and dill and something acidic that Shane couldn't identify.

"What's in the dressing?"

"Secret."

"It's not a secret. It's a recipe."

"It is my mother's recipe and therefore it is a secret and I will take it to my grave, Hollander, and you will never know."

"Is it sumac?"

Ilya pointed his fork at Shane. "I will not confirm or deny."

"It's sumac."

"It might be sumac. It might be magic. You will never know."

After dinner, they ended up on the couch. Anya between them, her head on Ilya's thigh. Shane had the remote. He scrolled past three hockey documentaries and a true crime series and landed on *Île de l'amour*, the Quebecois reality dating show that Ilya had become inexplicably addicted to despite not speaking French.

"This one," Ilya said. "Put this one on."

"You don't understand anything they're saying."

"I understand love, Hollander. Love is universal language. Also, the tall one with the tattoos is clearly lying to everyone and I want to see him get caught."

Shane put it on. The opening credits played — palm trees, a dock, beautiful people in swimwear looking meaningfully at the ocean. The host, a woman with red hair and a Saguenay accent, addressed the camera.

"She's saying they have a surprise twist tonight," Shane translated.

"Good. This show needs a twist. The brunette and the blond man have been boring for three episodes."

"How do you know they've been boring if you can't understand them?"

"Body language. The blond man does not touch her when they are alone. Only when cameras are close. This is a man who is performing a relationship. I know this. I was this."

Shane looked at him. Ilya was watching the screen with the same intensity he brought to game tape, reading patterns in people the way he read defensive formations.

"The tall one just told the brunette he loves her," Shane said.

"He is lying."

"You don't know that."

"I know that. His eyes go to the left when he says it. Left is lying. Also, he looked at the blond woman in the red bikini for four seconds when she walked past and four seconds is too long for a man who is supposedly in love with someone else."

"You counted four seconds."

"I am always counting." Ilya looked at him. His hazel eyes caught the light from the television. "I learned this from someone."

Shane didn't smile. But the thing his face did was close enough.

They watched two episodes. Shane translated the dialogue and Ilya provided commentary and Anya slept between them and the house was quiet and the leftover pelmeni were in a glass container in the fridge because Shane had transferred them from the pot immediately because food storage had rules.

At ten, Ilya turned off the television and kissed Shane's temple. "Tomorrow we do this again."

"Tomorrow you're on time."

"I am always on time. Time is a construct."

"Time is not a construct. Time is the thing that starts at eight a.m. and you arrived at seven fifty-eight."

"Seven fifty-eight is before eight. Therefore I was early."

Shane didn't argue this. He let Ilya pull him up from the couch and they took Anya outside and stood in the backyard — their backyard, where they'd gotten married, where the crabapple tree was blooming and the neighbor's cat sat on the fence judging them — and the night was warm and the city was quiet and the camp was going well and Melinda didn't lose and Ilya was here and for now, for this night, the world was small enough to fit in a kitchen.

They went to bed. Anya took her spot at the foot. Ilya was asleep in four minutes, which Shane knew because he counted.

Shane lay awake a while longer. He was thinking about the schedule for tomorrow, and the pylons, and the girl named Maren who'd gone onto the ice, and Craig Stephenson's face when Shane said *she's good*, and the banner that read *because everyone deserves to be okay,* and the cross that Ilya wore under every shirt he owned, and the folder on Laurier Avenue, and the days that were green and the days that were red and the number that was still not enough.

He was thinking about all of it. He was always thinking about all of it.

But the house was quiet, and Ilya was breathing beside him, and the dog was warm at his feet, and tomorrow they would go back to the rink and do it again, and for now that was the whole world.

Shane closed his eyes.

Ilya

Chapter 3: Ilya

Training camp. The road. A new assistant coach who's never played hockey and has already had enough of everyone's shit. The team is good. The ice is theirs. And somewhere online, someone is asking questions.

Training camp started the second week of September, and Ilya remembered what it felt like to be hungry.

Not for food. For the thing. The thing that happened when you stepped onto fresh ice at six in the morning with twenty-three men who'd spent all summer thinking about the same sixty minutes and the same ten pounds of silver and the same photograph — Scott Hunter hoisting the Cup at center ice in Ottawa's building, confetti in his hair, grinning at the camera like he owned the world, because for that night, he did.

Ottawa had been on the other side of that photograph. Ottawa had been in the tunnel watching. Ilya had been in the tunnel watching, his helmet in his hands, Shane beside him, the two of them standing close enough to touch but not touching because touching in a tunnel full of cameras after a loss was a different kind of photograph.

That was June. This was September. And Ilya Rozanov did not lose the same way twice.

Coach Wiebe was smiling. This was notable because Brandon Wiebe did not smile during training camp. Training camp was when Wiebe walked the ice with his whistle and his clipboard and the posture of a man who had seen the future and found it acceptable but not yet satisfactory. He'd been coaching Ottawa since 2020 —

four seasons, two playoff runs, one trip to the finals. He had a wife, three daughters, and the patience to let a roster find its shape.

But Wiebe was smiling, and Ilya thought he knew why: Shane Hollander, in his second year with Ottawa, had stopped being the new acquisition. Shane had become the spine.

It was not the way Ilya operated. Ilya was the voice, the energy, the captain who filled silence because silence was where doubt lived. Shane arrived forty minutes before everyone else and skated alone. When the team arrived, he slotted in without effort.

Or what looked like without effort. Ilya knew better. He'd watched Shane dismantle and rebuild his own game over fifteen years. Nothing about Shane was effortless. Everything about Shane looked effortless because Shane had done the work to make it disappear.

In practice: Ilya carried the puck through the neutral zone and knew, without looking, that Shane was on his left. Not because Shane was always on his left — he wasn't — but because Ilya could feel him. Fifteen years of playing against each other and two years of playing together had turned them into something that didn't have a word in English or Russian. Shane knew where Ilya was going before Ilya's feet committed to it. Ilya knew where Shane's stick would be the way he knew where his own hands were.

Zane saw it. During a three-on-two drill on the third day of camp, Ilya fed Shane a no-look backhand pass through two defenders and Shane one-timed it top corner without breaking stride, and Zane stopped skating and said, "That's not fair."

"What is not fair?" Ilya asked.

"That." Zane pointed his stick at both of them. "Whatever that is. The rest of us are playing hockey. You two are doing something else."

"We are also playing hockey."

"Maybe you're playing hockey in a shared hallucination. The rest of us are just in the building."

Wyatt, from the crease: "It's like they have a psychic link. Like Professor X and — "

"Do not," Zane said.

"I'm just saying — "

"Wyatt. Do not."

Wyatt closed his mouth. He'd finish the analogy at lunch. He always did.

Wiebe's new assistant coach was standing behind the bench with a clipboard and an inhaler. He had the posture of a man who had been watching hockey for forty years and had not been impressed for the last thirty.

Fred Johnson. Forty-one. Came from McGill, where he'd been an assistant for six seasons. Before that he'd coached bantam in Gatineau.

He had never played hockey. Not in college, not in juniors, not on a pond. He'd grown up in Pembroke watching it on television and taking apart what he saw the way some kids took apart radios. He was thin, the build of a man whose body had never been the point. He wore glasses. He used the inhaler between drills without apology or comment.

He had been with Ottawa for nine days. In that time he'd told Luca Haas that his neutral zone entries were predictable. He'd told Wyatt that his glove positioning drifted left when he was tired. And he'd told Ilya — ten-time All-Star, Stanley Cup champion, captain — that his backchecking in the second half of practice was "optional at best."

"Optional," Ilya had repeated.

"You coast after the forty-minute mark. You've been coasting after the forty-minute mark for probably five years and nobody's told you because you're Ilya Rozanov and who's going to tell Ilya Rozanov he's coasting. I'm telling you."

Ilya had stared at him. Fred had looked back, waiting, like he had more tape to watch and this conversation was keeping him from it.

"He might be right," Shane said later, at home, in the kitchen.

"He is not right."

"You do coast after forty minutes."

"I am conserving energy. This is strategy."

"It's coasting. Fred's right."

"Fred has never played a game of hockey in his life."

"Fred doesn't need to have played. Luca says Fred broke down his forecheck in three sentences and it was the best coaching he's had since Zurich."

"Luca is still a kid, easily impressed."

"Luca was a second-overall pick. If he says Fred's the real thing, that's worth listening to."

Ilya didn't answer. He was annoyed, which was its own information, because Ilya Rozanov did not get annoyed by people who were wrong.

"— look, I want to be real clear about this. Nobody's saying they can't play. Rozanov's a generational talent. Hollander's one of the best centers in the league. That's not the conversation. The conversation is about what's happening around the hockey. The optics. The camp, the foundation, the — and I'll say it because

nobody else will — the branding. Brewer, you've been covering this league thirty years. When did the NHL become a lifestyle brand?"

"Danny, I think what people are reacting to is the sense that the game is being used as a vehicle for — "

"For an agenda. Say it."

"For messaging that goes beyond the sport. And fans have a right to ask whether that's what they signed up for when they bought a ticket."

— Top Shelf with Brewer and Fitz, Episode 412: "Whose Game Is It?"

The road was different now.

For fifteen years the road had meant one thing: the lie. Hotels with separate rooms, separate floors sometimes, arriving and departing at different times so no one saw them together. Ilya would text Shane from three floors up — *room 1412, door is open*— and Shane would come, and they would have whatever hours the schedule gave them, and then Shane would leave, and Ilya would lie in the bed and stare at the ceiling and think about a future that felt impossible.

That was over. That had been over for years, but Ilya still caught himself sometimes — reaching for his phone to text a room number, then looking up and seeing Shane standing right next to him, holding both their key cards because Ilya lost things.

"You're staring again, " Shane said in the lobby of the Marriott in Philadelphia.

"I am not staring. I am looking. There is a difference."

"What's the difference?"

"Staring is rude. Looking is appreciative."

"You're appreciating me in a Marriott lobby."

"I appreciate you everywhere, Hollander. This is well documented."

Shane took his bag and Ilya's bag and they went to their room. One room. One bed, king-sized. Their names on the same door, and nobody cared, and the fact that nobody cared was still, after everything, the most extraordinary thing about Ilya Rozanov's life.

He called Yuna from the hotel room.

"She's fine," Yuna said before Ilya could ask. "She ate. She also ate one of David's slippers."

"Which one?"

"The left one. She has a preference."

"She does. Always the left. I think it is a political statement."

"David thinks it's a personal attack. He's been wearing the right slipper with a sock on the other foot and giving her looks. It's very dignified."

"Can I talk to her?"

A pause. Then the sound of the phone being lowered. Ilya spoke to Anya in Russian. He told her they would be home in two days. He told her to be good, or at least to be strategic about being bad.

From the bathroom, Shane: "You're talking to the dog on the phone again."

"She needs to hear my voice. She has anxiety."

"She's a dog. She doesn't understand Russian."

"She understands tone. Tone is universal. I have explained this."

"You've explained a lot of things about that dog that are not scientifically supported."

"Science does not know everything, Hollander. Science has not met Anya."

Ilya snored on the road. Not at home — at home he slept on his side with his face against Shane's shoulder and breathed like a normal human being. But in hotels and on buses, something about the recycled air or the unfamiliar mattress or the altitude or whatever excuse Shane would eventually find and catalog turned Ilya Rozanov into a man who could vibrate drywall.

On the bus back from Montreal, Shane fell asleep with his head on Ilya's shoulder before they hit the highway. Ilya sat very still. Shane falling asleep in public was rare and meant something had gone right.

Ilya was watching the 417 go dark outside the window when the first chip hit Shane's hair.

He looked up. Wyatt was two rows ahead, twisted around in his seat, hand already in the bag for round two. Evan Dykstra was next to him, looking at the ceiling with the deliberate innocence of a man who had definitely supplied the chips. Behind them, Jimmy Boyle had his phone out, recording. JP Lapointe was asleep or pretending to be.

"Hayes."

"I didn't do anything."

"There is a chip in his hair."

"Wind."

"We are on a bus."

Wyatt threw another one. It landed on Shane's knee. From three rows back, Jimmy's laugh — too loud, immediately smothered. JP opened one eye, assessed the situation, closed it.

Shane didn't move. His eyes stayed closed. "If the next chip touches me," he said, "I'm telling Wiebe about the peanut butter incident."

Silence.

"What peanut butter incident?" Ilya asked.

"There is no peanut butter incident, Cap," Wyatt said quickly.

"There's absolutely a peanut butter incident," Jimmy said.

"BOYLE."

"It involved the trainer's table and a dare and — "

"Boyle, I swear to God."

Shane opened one eye. Closed it. Settled deeper into Ilya's shoulder. The chip was still in his hair. Ilya left it there.

Later, at the hotel, Zane passed them in the hallway and said, "Rozanov, you've got something — " and gestured at his own head. Ilya reached up and found a second chip, flattened, stuck to the side of his beanie.

"Hayes," Ilya said.

"Hayes," Zane confirmed, and kept walking.

The team liked them. This was not nothing.

Ilya had played on teams where the room went quiet when he entered. Not because of talent — talent was respected everywhere — but because of the other thing. The thing that was not said but was known, and the knowing made people careful. Careful was not the same as comfortable.

Ottawa was not careful. Some of this was Wiebe, who'd made it clear in 2022 that anyone with a problem could find another team. Some of it was Zane, who'd been the first player to refer to Shane as "your husband" during dinner and no one blinked. Some of it was the staff — Dale in the equipment room who'd taped a small Russian flag next to a Canadian one on Ilya's stall without being asked, Terry who'd been team doctor for eleven years and treated everyone's body the same and everyone's bullshit the same, which was to say with no tolerance for either. Most of it was just the room.

Troy and Harris helped. Having a second couple in the building meant Shane and Ilya weren't a novelty. Troy held Harris's hand at team dinners and nobody looked twice. After a loss in Tampa, Troy had found Shane sitting alone outside the arena and had sat down next to him on the curb without saying a word. Fifteen minutes. Shane told Ilya about it later and Ilya had said, "Did he ask what was wrong?" and Shane had said, "No. He just sat there."

That was Troy.

Harris was on every road trip. He went where the team went. In Columbus, after a 4-1 preseason win that didn't count but still tasted like something, Ilya watched Harris at the far end of the restaurant table. Harris was looking at his phone under the table while Troy talked about the game next to him.

Troy's hand touched Harris's knee. Harris looked up. Smiled. Went back to the phone.

"Drover," Ilya said later, in the hallway. "What are you looking at?"

Harris stopped walking. "What?"

"Your phone. All night. During game, after game, at dinner."

Harris's jaw worked. "It's just noise."

"What kind of noise?"

"The usual kind. Trolls. Podcast idiots. There's a hashtag — " He stopped.

"Hashtag."

"It's nothing."

"If it is nothing, you would not be looking at it during dinner with your boyfriend who just had two assists and wanted you to be happy about it."

Harris looked at him. Then past him, at the elevator, like he was calculating the distance.

"#TakeBackHockey," Harris said. "It started small. A couple of podcasts, some Reddit threads. They're framing it as 'keep politics out of sports.' The camp, the foundation, you and Shane being — visible. They don't say the word. They don't have to."

"How big?"

"Trending in Canada yesterday. Low-level, but it's organized. Someone's putting money behind the media buys. The podcast driving most of it has sponsors."

"Which podcast?"

"Top Shelf. Brewer and Fitz. Three hundred thousand listeners. They run a segment every week called 'Whose Game Is It' and it's — " Harris rubbed the back of his neck. "It's smart. They never say anything actionable. They just ask questions. 'When did hockey

become political?' 'What message are we sending to kids?' And their audience fills in the blanks."

Ilya leaned against the wall.

"Does Shane know?"

"I don't think so. He doesn't look at social media."

"Good. Don't tell him yet."

"Ilya — "

"I said don't tell him yet." His voice was level. "Shane will want to fix it. Shane will want to make a spreadsheet and a plan and call Farrah and organize a response. And there is nothing to respond to yet. They are asking questions. You cannot fight questions."

Harris nodded. Then: "Farrah's already got her new sidekick on it. Jinky. They've been monitoring the Reddit threads for two weeks. Running counter-narratives, flagging the worst stuff before it spreads."

"Counter-narratives."

"Sock puppets. Burner accounts. Jinky's got maybe fifteen of them across three platforms." Harris's face changed when he talked about Jinky — something warmer, a little amused. Like a person describing a stray cat that turned out to have claws. "They're twenty-three and they weigh about a hundred and ten pounds and they are absolutely terrorizing the hockey subreddit. I showed them the podcast transcripts last week and they had a response strategy drafted before I finished my coffee."

"You and this Jinky. You are friends."

"Jinky's — " Harris stopped. Started again. "Jinky doesn't have a lot of people. And they fight like they've got nothing to lose, which is — yeah. We get along."

"Monitor it. Tell me when it changes."

He went back to the room. Shane was in bed with his tablet, probably game film. He looked up.

"Harris okay?"

"Harris is fine. He is just worried."

"About Troy? He had two assists tonight."

"Yes. That is not what Harris is worried about."

Shane waited. Ilya got into bed. Shane moved closer, and Ilya put his arm around him.

"What's wrong?" Shane said.

"Nothing is wrong. We won. Troy had two assists. Wyatt made thirty saves. You were — " He kissed the top of Shane's head. "You were perfect."

"I wasn't perfect. I lost two faceoffs in the third."

"Two faceoffs. Out of twenty-three. This is ninety-one percent."

"It's not ninety-one percent, it's — " Shane paused. "It's ninety-one-point-three."

"So you are already calculating."

"I'm always calculating."

Ilya held him. The room was dark and the city was outside doing whatever Columbus did at midnight and Ilya lay there thinking about what Harris had said and what Harris hadn't said and whether questions you couldn't fight were more dangerous than accusations you could.

"— and I keep getting emails, Brew. Not from the crazies. From dads. From coaches. Guys who've been in this game their whole lives saying, 'Danny, something's changed, and I don't recognize it anymore.' These are good people. These are people who taught their kids to skate in the backyard, who drive four hours to tournaments, who bleed this sport. And they feel like the game they love has been hijacked by a — a cultural project. That's not bigotry. That's grief."

"I think the question people keep coming back to is: can you separate the player from the platform? Rozanov and Hollander are elite players. No one disputes that. But when you use the NHL — the ice, the uniform, the brand — to promote a specific worldview, you have to expect pushback. That's not hate. That's the marketplace of ideas."

"And the hockey camp. I gotta say this. They've got a foundation — the Irina Foundation, named after Rozanov's mother — and they're running these camps with kids. Five-year-olds. And the messaging is — look, I'll just read it: 'tolerance, inclusion, mental health awareness.' That sounds great. Who could argue with that? But what does it mean? What are they actually teaching these kids between the drills?"

"You're going to get called a bigot for even asking that question."

"And that's the problem, isn't it? You can't ask. The minute you ask, you're the bad guy."

— Top Shelf with Brewer and Fitz, Episode 418: "Questions Nobody's Allowed to Ask"

October. The season opened.

Ottawa beat Philadelphia 3-1 on opening night. Ilya had a goal and two assists. Shane won nineteen of twenty-four faceoffs. Wiebe

stood behind the bench with his arms crossed and said nothing to anyone, which was how Wiebe communicated satisfaction.

When Ilya scored the second goal — a wrist shot from the left circle, glove-side — the building shook and he pointed at Shane because Shane had made the pass. The camera caught it. The photograph was in every sports feed by morning.

They won five of the first seven. Then seven of ten. Shane was playing the best hockey of his career, and Ilya had stopped being surprised by this because Shane did it every year — came back in October a little faster, a little sharper, having fixed something over the summer that Ilya hadn't even realized was broken.

Ilya watched him on the ice and thought: *this is the year.*

After a win in Montreal — 4-2, Shane with three assists — Ilya found Shane in the hallway outside the visitor's locker room, already showered, already on his phone, already planning tomorrow's skate.

"Hollander."

Shane looked up. His hair was still wet and his tie was crooked and he had a bruise forming on his jaw from a high stick in the second period that he hadn't mentioned to anyone because Shane did not mention things that were not, in his assessment, relevant.

Ilya straightened his tie. Shane stood still and let him.

"You have a bruise."

"I know."

"You did not tell Terry."

"It's a bruise. Terry has actual injuries to deal with."

"You are very stubborn."

"I've been playing hockey all my life, Rozanov. Don't baby me."

Ilya touched the bruise, lightly, with his thumb. Shane's eyes closed for a second. When they opened, Wyatt was standing four feet away with his bag over his shoulder and his phone aimed at them.

"Don't you dare," Shane said.

"It's for the group chat. Zane has a bet that you two can't go one road trip without being disgustingly sweet and I need evidence."

"Delete it."

"Already sent. Zane owes me twenty bucks." Wyatt slung his bag higher and headed for the bus. "You're welcome for my service."

Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya shrugged.

"He is going to post that."

"He posts everything. Last week he posted a video of me sleeping on the bus."

"The snoring video."

"There is no snoring video."

"There is absolutely a snoring video. Wyatt sent it to the group chat at two in the morning with the caption 'grizzly bear or Ilya Rozanov' and the vote was unanimous."

"I do not snore."

"You snore on the road. You don't snore at home. It's your one flaw."

"I have many flaws."

"You have one flaw and it's road snoring and Wyatt has documented it."

Ilya wanted to argue but Shane was close to smiling and the hallway was empty and he let it go.

Not just for the Cup. For the thing they'd almost had last season, the thing Scott Hunter had taken from them in their own building. Ilya had led the Bears to the Stanley Cup. He'd carried the weight of that win alone because the person he wanted to celebrate with was in a different city wearing a different jersey. Now — finally — he could win it with Shane beside him.

On a bus between Philadelphia and Newark, Fred Johnson was sitting in the third row with his laptop open and his inhaler on the armrest. His glasses reflected game footage Ilya couldn't see but could hear — the tinny sound of skates and whistles from a single earbud.

Fred wore one earbud. The other ear stayed open. He said this was so he could hear if anyone needed him. Ilya suspected it was so he could hear what the players said when they thought no one was listening.

Luca Haas was in the seat across the aisle, leaning over to look at Fred's screen. He'd been doing this since the second week of camp — gravitating toward Fred between drills, after practice, on buses. The rest of the coaching staff had noticed. Ilya thought he understood it, though he wasn't sure he'd have been able to explain it if someone asked.

"There," Fred said, pausing the footage. "See your hip angle? You're opening up before the pass. Defender reads it every time."

Luca leaned closer. "Every time?"

"Last three games. Every time."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I wanted to see if you'd catch it yourself. You didn't."

Luca sat back. Thought about it. Grinned. "I like you, Fred."

"That's great, Luca. Fix your hips."

Ilya watched this from four rows back. He was thinking about the forty-minute mark. Fred had been right. Ilya had spent the last two weeks pushing through that wall in practice just to prove he wasn't coasting, which meant Fred had already won. This was annoying.

The November road trip was long. Six games in eleven days. Ilya called Yuna every other night.

"The slipper situation has escalated," Yuna reported from Ottawa. "She's moved on to David's reading glasses case."

"The leather one?"

"Was the leather one. Now it's a crime scene."

"Tell David I will replace it."

"David says he doesn't want a replacement. David says he wants the dog to respect his personal property. I told him that was unreasonable."

"Your husband is a reasonable man."

"My husband has been in government for thirty years and thinks rules apply to everyone, including fifteen-pound dogs. This is his weakness."

Ilya laughed. He was alone in a hotel room in Denver. Shane was at the rink.

"How is he?" Yuna asked.

"He is playing the best hockey I have ever seen him play."

"That's not what I asked."

"He is happy. He is — " Ilya searched for the word. "He is where he should be."

"And you?"

"I am also where I should be."

"Ilya."

"Yes, my dear mother-in-law."

"Are you sleeping?"

"I am sleeping."

"You're not sleeping. I can hear it."

Ilya looked at the ceiling.

"There is noise," he said. "Online. A movement. Hashtag. They are saying things about the camp. About us. About what we are teaching kids. Just bullshit, really."

"What kind of things?"

"The kind that are designed to sound reasonable so that no one can say they are unreasonable. Questions. 'What are they really teaching?' 'When did hockey become political?' This type."

Yuna was quiet for a moment.

"How big?" she said.

"Harris says it is growing. A podcast. Sponsors. It is organized."

"Does Shane know?"

"No."

"Ilya."

"I will tell him. Not yet."

"You can't protect him from this."

"I know."

"You can't protect him by hiding things. That's what you two did for eight years and it almost destroyed both of you."

"I will tell him," Ilya said again. "I want to know what it is first. Right now it is noise. If it becomes something, I will tell him."

"It's already something, or Harris wouldn't be losing sleep."

Ilya didn't answer that.

"I'll call you tomorrow," he said.

"You'll call me tomorrow and tell me you told Shane."

"Goodnight, Mom."

"Goodnight. Tell your dog she's on thin ice with the reading glasses."

"She is not my dog tonight. Tonight she is David's problem."

"David doesn't believe in problems. David believes in process."

Ilya hung up. He sat on the bed and pressed his thumb against the cross at his sternum through his T-shirt. The heating system pushed air through the vents. His phone buzzed.

Harris: *Three new accounts running #TakeBackHockey with identical launch times and copied bios. Coordinated. Jinky's already on it.*

Ilya read it. Put the phone facedown on the nightstand.

Shane came back at nine, hair wet from the hotel gym, already talking about the ice surface at the arena, something about the left circle and the boards and a variable Ilya did not follow.

"Hollander."

Shane stopped talking.

"Come here."

Shane sat on the edge of the bed. Ilya pulled him back against his chest. Shane let him.

"I need to tell you something," Ilya said.

"— and the numbers don't lie, Fitz. #TakeBackHockey is the number-one trending sports hashtag in Canada this week. That's not a fringe movement. That's a conversation. And what I find interesting — what I find really interesting — is that the league hasn't said a word. Not one statement. Not one press conference. Total silence. Which tells me — "

"They're scared."

"I didn't say scared. I said strategic. The league knows that if they weigh in, they take a side, and right now nobody wants to take a side because the minute you take a side — "

"You lose half your audience."

"Exactly. So they let it play out. They let the Rozanovs and the Hollanders of the world do their thing, and they let the fans who have legitimate concerns voice those concerns, and they hope it all blows over. But I'm telling you, Fitz. This isn't blowing over. This is building.

And at some point, the league, the teams, the players — they're all going to have to pick a side."

"Well, I know which side I'm on."

"Which side is that?"

"The side of hockey, Brew. Just hockey. That's all I've ever wanted. Just the game."

"Amen to that. When we come back — Luca Haas and the Swiss development pipeline. Stay with us."

— Top Shelf with Brewer and Fitz, Episode 421: "The Silence of the League"

Ilya told him.

He told him about #TakeBackHockey and the podcast and the coordinated accounts and the sponsors and the word that nobody used but everybody meant.

Shane didn't interrupt. When Ilya finished, Shane was quiet.

"How long have you known?"

"Harris told me in Columbus."

"Columbus was two weeks ago."

"Yes."

"You kept this from me for two weeks."

"I was — " Ilya stopped. He knew what he wanted to say — that he'd been protecting Shane, that he'd been managing it, that he'd had it under control — and he knew all of those were true and none of

them were the real answer. "I didn't want you to have to think about it."

"That's not your decision."

"I know."

"It's not your decision what I think about."

"I know, Shane."

Shane sat up. His jaw was tight and his hands were flat on his thighs, the way he sat when he was working through something that didn't have an obvious solution. Not angry. Or not just angry. Recalculating.

"Don't do that," Shane said. "Don't keep things from me."

"Okay."

"Show me."

Ilya handed him his phone. Shane took it and started reading. His face didn't change. His hands were steady. He scrolled with the same focus he brought to game film — methodical, absorbing everything, reacting to nothing.

"I want to talk to Harris," Shane said. "And Farrah. Tomorrow."

"Okay."

"And I want every episode of that podcast downloaded."

"Hollander — "

"I'm not going to listen to all of them. I'm going to have Farrah's team analyze the language patterns. Who they're quoting. Who's advertising. Where the money comes from." Shane set the phone on

the nightstand. "This isn't random. This is a campaign. Campaigns have infrastructure. Infrastructure can be traced."

He lay back down. Ilya pulled him close. Shane was stiff for a moment, still running the calculations, and then he wasn't.

"I should have told you sooner," Ilya said.

"Yes."

"I am sorry."

Shane didn't say anything. His hand found Ilya's wrist and stayed there, his thumb resting on the pulse point, and whether that was forgiveness or just Shane needing something solid to hold onto, Ilya didn't know. He didn't always know. That was the thing about loving someone for fifteen years — you learned that knowing was less important than staying.

Somewhere in Ottawa, Anya was eating something she shouldn't. The hashtag was trending. The podcast was building. The season was young and the team was good and outside the hotel the world was doing what it always did.

Ilya pressed his thumb against the cross. He didn't sleep until a half-awake Shane patted his cheek and said, "Go to sleep, my love."

My love.

Shane

Chapter 4: Shane

December through the second round. Shane tracks the noise, Melinda delivers a number, Christmas at the Hollanders' goes exactly the way it always does, and the playoffs bring Ottawa face to face with a legend's last run — and a six-second audio clip that changes everything.

December came in hard.

Three games in four nights — Detroit, Chicago, back home for Minnesota — and Shane was running on protein bars and game film and the four hours of sleep Ilya's schedule allowed. Ilya slept like a man with no concerns. Shane slept like a man with a spreadsheet open in his head that wouldn't stop adding rows.

The spreadsheet was real. It lived on his laptop in a folder called MISC-2024 because Shane had learned, in the years since being outed by a FanMail video filmed in Hayden Pike's living room, that the things you labeled honestly were the things people found first. The spreadsheet tracked #TakeBackHockey. It tracked the podcast — *Top Shelf with Brewer and Fitz,* three hundred thousand listeners, growing — and it tracked the language. Not the slurs. The slurs were easy, self-discrediting, the work of people too stupid to know they were supposed to be subtle. Shane tracked the other kind. The questions.

When did hockey become political?

What are we really teaching these kids?

Can you separate the player from the platform?

Questions that sounded reasonable until you realized they all pointed in the same direction, the way a hundred different roads can all lead to the same locked gate.

Farrah Jalali had a team. Shane had a spreadsheet. Between them, they were building something — a map of the money, the media buys, the coordinated account launches. Jinky was in the trenches. Shane knew them from a handful of get-togethers that Ilya liked to host. Jinky had shown up to Zane and Ilya's rib-off at the grill last summer, all sharp elbows and opinions, and had somehow ended up in a forty-minute argument with Wyatt about whether barbecue sauce was a condiment or a marinade. But on a video call two weeks ago, walking Shane through the Reddit architecture in nine minutes flat, they'd been something else entirely. Twenty-three years old and locked in, a Monster Energy can visible at the edge of the frame.

"The podcast is the mothership," Jinky had said, their face too close to the camera. "Everything else is distribution. The Reddit threads link to the podcast. The podcast links to the merch store. The merch store funds the media buys. It's a closed loop. Very clean."

"Who built it?"

"Someone with money and a grudge and a basic understanding of media ecosystems. So, like, half of Toronto."

Shane had added three more columns to his spreadsheet after that call.

Ilya didn't ask about the spreadsheet. He knew it existed the way he knew about the spice rack and the protein bars and the Lysol wipes under every sink — as a fact of Shane, unremarkable, load-bearing. Sometimes at night Shane would be on his laptop in bed and Ilya would glance over and see the columns and say nothing and put his hand on Shane's thigh and go back to whatever terrible reality show

he was watching, and the hand on Shane's thigh was not a comment or an interruption. It was just Ilya, being there.

He was watching *Île de l'amour* again. The tall one with the tattoos had been caught, as Ilya predicted, and was now in a canoe with two women and a producer and Ilya was providing commentary in a mix of English and Russian that Shane had stopped trying to follow three episodes ago.

"Hollander."

"Mm."

"You are not watching."

"I'm working."

"You are always working. I am trying to share culture with you and you are making a spreadsheet."

"It's a Quebecois reality show. It's not culture."

"All reality television is culture. It is the culture of people being terrible to each other on camera for money. This is the most honest art form."

Shane closed the laptop. Ilya was looking at him with the half-smile, the one that wasn't performing anything, the one that was just his mouth deciding to do something and doing it. Light brown curls against the pillow. The cross at his sternum catching the light from the television.

"Come here," Ilya said.

"I'm right here."

"You are right there but you are not here. Your body is in bed but your brain is in the spreadsheet. I want both."

Shane put the laptop on the nightstand. Ilya reached for him — hand on the back of his neck, pulling him down, and Shane went because going was easier than explaining why he'd been sitting eighteen inches away from Ilya Rozanov for the last hour and a half without touching him, which was a failure of priorities so basic it didn't deserve analysis.

Ilya kissed him. Not fast, not urgent. Slow. The kind of deliberate Ilya reserved for things he considered important, which was a short list: hockey, food, and Shane, roughly in that order depending on the day. His other hand found Shane's hip and pulled until Shane was half on top of him, and Anya, displaced from her spot between them, gave them a look of profound betrayal and relocated to the foot of the bed.

"Better," Ilya said against his mouth.

"I wasn't done working."

"You were done. You didn't know you were done. I am telling you."

Shane could have argued this. He didn't. Ilya's thumb was tracing the line of his jaw and his mouth was warm and he tasted like the mint tea he drank before bed because Ilya had read somewhere that mint tea improved sleep quality and had committed to it with the absolute conviction he brought to all pseudoscience. Shane's hand found the cross at Ilya's chest, the thin chain, the warm gold. He held it for a second. Let it go.

"The tall one got caught," Shane said.

"I told you. I told you in episode four. You did not believe me."

"I believed you. I just thought it would take longer."

"It always takes longer on television. In life, liars are caught quickly because they are lazy. Television liars are caught slowly because the show needs twelve episodes." Ilya pulled back enough to look at

him. Hazel eyes, close enough that Shane could see the darker ring around the iris. "Stop thinking."

"I can't stop thinking."

"You can. I will help." He kissed him again, and this time it was less patient, and Shane let the spreadsheet dissolve because Ilya's hands were under his shirt and the math could wait.

Melinda Sotto called on a Tuesday.

Shane was at the rink, post-practice, sitting in his stall pulling tape off his shins. His phone buzzed and the screen said SOTTO, M. and he answered it in the hallway with his skates still on because some calls you didn't let go to voicemail.

"Shane. Good news."

Shane leaned against the wall. The hallway smelled like rubber mats and Zamboni exhaust. Two equipment managers walked past carrying a net.

"Ilya's file is progressing well. The documentation is solid, the timeline is clean, and I've spoken with the reviewing officer. If everything continues on track — and I want to emphasize that 'if' — he should be eligible to file for citizenship in approximately eighteen months."

Shane didn't say anything for a second. Eighteen months. A number. A real number with a date attached to it, not the amorphous *eventually* and *when the process allows* and *these things take time* that had been the only answer for years.

"Shane?"

"I'm here. Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. Eighteen months is a best-case scenario and there are variables I can't control. But the file is strong. You've both done the work."

"We'll keep doing the work."

"I know you will. That's why I took the case." A pause. "Tell Ilya I said congratulations. Provisionally."

Shane hung up. He stood in the hallway for a minute. A best-case scenario. Variables she couldn't control. Eighteen months.

He went back to the room. Ilya was across the locker room talking to Zane about something, his pads half off, gesturing with a roll of tape. Shane walked over. Ilya looked up.

"Melinda called."

Ilya's hand stopped mid-gesture. Zane looked between them and quietly left.

"Eighteen months," Shane said. "If everything goes well. She says the file is strong."

Ilya didn't move. The tape hung from his hand. The room was emptying — guys heading to the showers, the weight room, the parking lot — and neither of them noticed.

"Eighteen months," Ilya said.

"Eighteen months."

Ilya set the tape down. He pulled Shane in by the front of his practice jersey, which was soaked and smelled terrible, and kissed him in the middle of the Ottawa Centaurs locker room, and from somewhere near the showers Wyatt said, "Called it. Zane, you owe me another twenty," and Shane didn't care because eighteen months was a number and the number had a shape and the shape looked like a country that could be his husband's.

Christmas Eve.

They drove to Shane's parents' house after practice, Anya in the back seat in her carrier, her nose pressed against the mesh because she wanted to see everything and could reach nothing and had not made peace with either fact. Shane's parents lived twenty minutes away. The same house Shane had grown up in.

His mother opened the door before they knocked. She was already talking.

"I bought a dress in Montreal that your father is not allowed to comment on because the last time your father commented on a purchase I made, it was 2019 and we agreed never to speak of it again."

David Hollander appeared behind her in the hallway. Five-ten, same height as Shane, with reading glasses pushed up on his forehead and the comfortable build of a man who'd played hockey at McGill thirty years ago and now played golf badly and didn't mind. He had the kind of face you'd trust your drink with at a party — steady, unflappable, the product of three decades at the Treasury Board of Canada.

He pulled Shane into a hug without ceremony. Then Ilya. Then he crouched to greet Anya, who threw herself against his legs with the full-body devotion she reserved for people who let her on the furniture.

"She destroyed other slipper," Ilya told Shane's mother in the kitchen. "Before we left. The right one this time."

"David's slipper. David's problem."

"David has moved on," his father said from the living room, where Anya was already on his lap, her head against his chest, performing

repentance with her entire body. "David and Anya have reached an understanding."

"The understanding is that she wins and he accepts it," his mother said.

Shane was in the kitchen helping with the sugar cookies, because Christmas baking at the Hollander house was Shane's domain by virtue of being the person in the family who followed recipes exactly and did not improvise. Ilya baked the way he played hockey — by feel, by instinct, adjusting mid-motion — and this resulted in cookies that were either transcendent or inedible, with no middle ground.

"I'm not allowed to help?" Ilya said, leaning against the counter.

"You're allowed to watch."

"This is discrimination."

"This is quality control. Last year you put cardamom in the gingerbread."

"Cardamom is good."

"Cardamom is good in curry. It is not good in gingerbread. The Pike children cried."

"Amber cried. Amber cries about everything. She is six. This is normal."

Shane measured flour. Ilya watched him measure flour. His mother sat at the table with tea and the expression of a woman who had been watching these two for years and still found it entertaining.

"Melinda called," Shane said, not looking up from the measuring cup.

His mother's cup paused halfway to her mouth.

"Eighteen months. If everything goes well."

He told them. The file, the timeline, the reviewing officer. His mother listened the way she listened — still, precise, asking the right questions. His father came in from the living room. Anya followed, her nails clicking on the hardwood.

When Shane finished, his mother looked at Ilya.

"How do you feel?"

Ilya was quiet for a moment. He was leaning against the counter with his arms crossed and the expression that meant he was deciding how honest to be.

"I feel like a man who has been told that the door might open in eighteen months," he said. "And I am grateful. And I am also aware that doors can close."

"This one won't," his mother said.

"You do not know that."

"I do. Because you told me Melinda Sotto doesn't lose and my son doesn't stop and you married into this family and we don't let doors close."

Ilya looked at her. Then at Shane. Then at the flour on Shane's hands and the dough on the counter and the dog at his feet and the house around them — not their house, but close, the one Shane had grown up in, the one where David had taught him to skate and Yuna had timed his sprints.

"Okay," Ilya said.

They went to midnight mass at the church on Richmond Road. Ilya stood between Shane and Yuna, the cross warm against his sternum beneath his shirt, and sang along to the parts he knew in a low voice that wasn't performing anything. Shane didn't sing. Shane held Ilya's

hand in the pew and watched the candles and let the quiet do what the quiet did.

They stayed the night, the way they always did on Christmas Eve. Shane's old room, which his mother had converted into a guest room years ago but which still had the closet door Shane had marked his height on every birthday until he was sixteen and stopped growing at five-ten and never forgave his father's genetics for it.

After mass, while Shane was brushing his teeth, Ilya hung a small red stocking on the mantel below theirs. Anya's name stitched on it. He didn't say anything about it. He just did it and went to bed.

Christmas morning. Shane came downstairs to find his father already in the armchair with coffee, looking at the stocking.

"When did that appear?"

"Last night," Shane said. "Probably Santa."

"Of course it was Santa."

Inside: a new chew toy shaped like a hockey puck, a bag of the salmon treats she loved, and one of David's old slippers, which Ilya had taken from the house months ago and been saving for this moment.

David opened his gift from Ilya next. A brand new pair of slippers. Identical to the ones Anya had been systematically destroying for three years.

"You're enabling her," David said, looking from the slippers to the dog, who was already gnawing on the old one from her stocking.

"I am solving a problem I created," Ilya said. "This is called accountability."

"This is called a racket."

"In Russia we call this good business."

Shane watched from the couch. His mother was next to him, her head on his shoulder, which happened once or twice a year and always surprised him even though it shouldn't have. His father was in the armchair with his new slippers. Ilya was on the floor with the dog, telling her in Russian that the slipper was a gift and she should be grateful and also strategic about when she destroyed it.

The tree smelled like pine. The house smelled like the cinnamon rolls Ilya had made at five in the morning because Ilya cooked when he was happy. Outside, the Ottawa snow was clean and the street was quiet and the world was the size of this room.

Shane's phone was in the kitchen. The spreadsheet was in the laptop back at their house. The noise was out there, building, getting organized, getting louder. He knew this. He chose not to reach for it. Not today.

"— and look, we've been saying this for months, but the Dallas Kent trial is Exhibit A. Here's a guy who played thirteen seasons in the league, went to two All-Star games, and is now sitting in a courtroom in Toronto because — allegedly — he assaulted multiple women. Multiple. And the question I keep asking is: where was the accountability? Where were the teams? Where was the league?"

"Nowhere, Danny. The league was nowhere. Same place it always is."

"But here's what gets me, Fitz. Here's what really gets me. The same league that looked the other way on Dallas Kent for thirteen years is now — actively, publicly — promoting players who use the game as a vehicle for social messaging. So you can allegedly assault women and keep your job, but God forbid you ask whether a hockey camp should be teaching five-year-olds about gender identity."

"The camp doesn't teach that."

"I know it doesn't teach that. I'm saying that's the perception. And perception matters. When the Rozanov-Hollander camp runs under a banner that says 'tolerance and inclusion' — and again, those are great words, I'm not against those words — but when that becomes the brand of the league, and the same league can't keep its own house clean on something as basic as 'don't assault women' — you see the hypocrisy."

"The Kent situation is a legal matter. It's different."

"Is it? Is it really? Because Troy Barrett — Rozanov's own teammate — is the guy who blew the whistle on Kent. Called him a rapist on the ice, right to his face. Got traded for it. And now Barrett's in Ottawa, in that locker room, part of the whole operation. So the same organization that runs the tolerance camp employs the guy who publicly destroyed Kent's career based on allegations. Not a conviction. Allegations."

"Dallas Kent is on trial, Brew. There are eleven accusers."

"And he deserves his day in court. That's all I'm saying. Everyone deserves due process. Even the people we've already decided are guilty."

— Top Shelf with Brewer and Fitz, Episode 434: "The Kent Question"

January was hockey.

Ottawa won nine of twelve. Shane had thirty-one points in thirty-four games and the hockey felt clean, the way hockey felt when the system was working and the room was right and everyone was playing for the same thing. Fred Johnson's fingerprints were everywhere. Luca Haas's neutral zone entries were no longer predictable. Wyatt's glove had stopped drifting left. And Ilya — ten-time All-Star, Stanley Cup champion, captain — had stopped coasting at the forty-minute mark, not because Fred had told him to but because Fred had made it impossible to pretend he wasn't.

Shane loved this team. He loved them the way he loved systems — for their interlocking parts, their reliability, the way twenty-three people could skate onto the ice with a shared understanding of where to be and when to be there. He'd loved Montreal too, once, before the FanMail video and the twenty-two teammates who'd pretended he wasn't in the room. Ottawa was different. Ottawa had been different since the day he'd signed, since Wiebe's handshake and the team's first press conference and Ilya standing in the kitchen of the house they now shared, saying, "This is your team now, Hollander. Our team."

A sign appeared at the January 14th game against Winnipeg. Section 108, upper deck. White banner, black letters: **KEEP POLITICS OFF THE ICE.**

Shane saw it during the second period. He was on the bench, waiting for a line change, and his eyes went up the way they sometimes did during stoppages — scanning the crowd, a habit from years of being photographed when he didn't want to be. The sign was in the third row of section 108. Two men holding it. One was wearing a Centaurs jersey. The other was wearing a hat Shane couldn't read from this distance.

He didn't react. He watched the play.

The sign was gone by the third period. Arena security, probably. Harris would know. Shane would ask him later.

He didn't ask Ilya if he'd seen it. He didn't need to. After the game — a 3-1 win, Ilya with the game-winner — Shane found Ilya in the hallway and Ilya said, "Section 108," and Shane said, "Yeah," and that was the whole conversation.

February. The trade deadline passed. Ottawa didn't need much — a depth defenseman from Calgary, a fourth-liner from Winnipeg who could kill penalties. Wiebe trusted his room. The room trusted Wiebe.

On February 4th, during a home game against Philadelphia, a man in the lower bowl yelled something at Ilya during a stoppage. Shane was on the ice. He didn't hear the words. He heard the tone — loud, sharp, meant to carry — and he saw Ilya's back stiffen and then relax, deliberately, the way Ilya managed his body in public when something hit.

After the game, Shane asked.

"What did he say?"

"Nothing important."

"Ilya."

"He said to go back to Russia. Among other things." Ilya was unlacing his skates. His voice was level. "There are always people who say this. It is not new."

"Was it just that?"

Ilya looked at him. "No. There was a word. The word. He was very creative with it."

Shane's jaw tightened. Ilya saw it.

"Don't," Ilya said. "This is what they want. A reaction. Something they can film and post and say, 'See? See how angry they get? See how they can't take a joke?' I will not give them this."

"It's not a joke."

"I know it is not a joke. But I have heard this word in four languages and it has never once changed what I do on the ice. Tomorrow I will score two goals and this man will still be in section 214 with his twelve-dollar beer and his small life and I will be going home to you. This is not a contest."

Shane looked at him. Ilya looked back.

"Two goals," Shane said.

"Minimum."

He scored three.

The playoffs started in April.

Ottawa finished second in the Atlantic Division. Forty-eight wins, ninety-eight points. Best season in franchise history. Shane had seventy-eight points. Ilya had eighty-four. Luca Haas, in his second full season, had fifty-one and a grin that hadn't faded since October. Fred Johnson had been nominated for an assistant coaching award that he seemed to find genuinely annoying.

"They want me at a dinner," Fred said on the bus to the arena for Game 1. "A dinner. In Toronto. With a podium."

"You don't like dinners?" Shane asked.

"I don't like podiums. Podiums suggest you've done something notable enough to stand above other people and talk at them. I showed a kid how to fix his hips. That's not notable. That's my job."

"Take the award, Fred."

"I'll think about it."

He would not think about it. He would go because Wiebe would tell him to and he would stand at the podium and say four sentences and sit down and it would be the shortest acceptance speech in the history of the award, and Luca Haas would record it and post it and it would get more views than any of Wyatt's Spider-Man analogies, which Wyatt would find personally devastating.

Second round. Ottawa vs. New York.

Scott Hunter's last run.

The matchup was announced and the league publicity machine did what it always did — compressed complicated human lives into television graphics. The storylines wrote themselves: the retiring legend versus the ascending contender, the old guard versus the new, the man who'd come out first versus the men who'd come out after.

The network promos used footage of Scott hoisting the Cup in Ottawa's building the year before — his second, the one that had ended Shane and Ilya's season in the tunnel — and Shane had to watch it three times in the hotel lobby because it played on a loop on every screen and he couldn't not see it. Ilya standing next to him in the tunnel. The confetti. The photograph.

"You are watching again," Ilya said.

"I'm not watching. It's on every television in the building."

"You are watching on purpose. You are watching for motivation. This is what you do."

"I'm getting coffee."

"You are getting coffee and motivation. I know you, Hollander."

Game 1 was in Ottawa. The building was sold out before the schedule was released. Signs in the crowd, most of them harmless — **GO CENTAURS, HOLLANDER #24**, someone had made a banner that said **CAMP ROZANOV** with a logo Ilya found hilarious and Shane found legally questionable. A few of the other kind. **KEEP POLITICS OFF THE ICE** was back, section 210 this time. A new one: **JUST PLAY HOCKEY.**

They won Game 1 by three. Ilya had four points. Shane won twenty-two of twenty-six faceoffs. The crowd was standing for the last five minutes. When the horn sounded, Wyatt hugged Shane so hard he

lifted him off the ice, which was notable because Shane was not a small person and Wyatt had the enthusiasm of a man who did not calibrate his physical affection.

Game 2, Ottawa won in overtime. Shane to Ilya, one-timer from the left circle, same shot that had beaten Philadelphia in October but this time with seventeen thousand people screaming and Ilya sliding across the ice on his knees and pointing at Shane because that was their thing, that was what they did, the pass and the point and the photograph and the world watching.

Game 3 in New York. Loss. Scott Hunter scored twice and the Admirals' building shook the way it used to shake when Shane and Ilya were on opposite sides and the rivalry was real and public and the thing underneath was secret and impossible.

Game 4. Loss. Series tied.

In the hotel after Game 4, Shane sat on the edge of the bed with the game on his laptop, scrubbing through shifts, looking for the thing he'd missed. Ilya came out of the bathroom with wet hair and no shirt and watched him from the doorway.

"You will not find it on film."

"I'll find something."

"You will find that Scott Hunter is playing the best hockey of his life because he knows it is the last hockey of his life and a man with nothing to lose is the most dangerous kind of man." Ilya sat next to him. "We are not losing to Scott Hunter. We are losing to what Scott Hunter becomes when the door is closing."

"That's poetic."

"I am a poetic man. Close the laptop."

Shane closed the laptop.

"We win Game 5 at home," Ilya said. "We win Game 6 here. We do not need Game 7 because Game 7 is for teams that do not trust themselves and I trust this team."

"You trust this team."

"I trust this team. I trust Weibe and Zane and Troy and Wyatt, who will make twenty-eight saves because I will tell him he is Spider-Man and he will believe me. And I trust you." He leaned over and kissed the spot below Shane's ear where the jaw met the neck. "I have trusted you since Toronto. Since the endorsement shoot. You were nineteen and you were so nervous your hands were shaking."

"My hands were not shaking."

"Your hands were shaking and you knocked over a water bottle and pretended you did not. I saw everything."

"You remember that."

"I remember everything about you, Hollander. This is my problem."

Shane turned his head. Their mouths were close. "That's not a problem."

"It is a problem because I remember everything and you remember statistics. I tell you something romantic and you tell me your faceoff percentage."

"Ninety-one-point-three."

Ilya pulled him down by the collar of his t-shirt and Shane let himself go, and the laptop slid off the bed and neither of them reached for it.

"We will win this in six," Ilya said, after.

"You keep saying that."

"Because it is true. I do not say things that are not true."

"You told Hayden you were six-four."

"I am six-four in some shoes."

"You're six-three in every shoe."

"Goodnight, Hollander."

On the morning of Game 5, the audio leaked.

Harris called Shane at seven-fifteen. Shane was in the kitchen making coffee. Ilya was still asleep.

"Have you seen it?" Harris said.

"Seen what?"

"Check your phone. Check Twitter. Check everything."

Shane opened Twitter. The clip was everywhere. Six seconds of audio, recorded — according to the source — at an owners' meeting in Scottsdale three weeks earlier. The voice was unmistakable. Roger Crowell had been commissioner for eleven years. He'd given a thousand press conferences. He had a flat, measured baritone that sounded like a man reading terms and conditions, except in this clip he was not reading terms and conditions.

He was talking to someone off-camera. The audio was tinny, compressed, obviously recorded on a phone from across the room.

"— and I'm telling you, the fags are ruining this sport. It used to be — you could sell hockey. To families. To real fans. Now every broadcast is a — a fucking pride parade and the sponsors are — look, at least Hunter has the grace to retire."

Six seconds. Shane played it twice. He set his phone on the counter.

His hands were steady. His hands were always steady. This was not a virtue. It was a circuit — something in him that disconnected the body from the event so the body could keep working while the mind caught up. He'd been like this since Montreal, since the day he cleaned out his stall while twenty-two teammates pretended he wasn't there. His hands had been steady then, too.

Harris was talking. "Farrah's drafting a statement. The league's going to put out something in the next hour, some garbage about 'deeply troubling' and 'doesn't reflect our values.' The Players' Association is meeting at nine. I need to know what you and Ilya want to say."

"We're not saying anything yet."

"Shane — "

"We're not saying anything until we've seen the league's statement. I want to know what they're going to pretend to do before we decide what we're actually going to do."

"This is going to be everywhere by noon. It's already everywhere."

"I know. We have a game tonight. We're not saying anything before the game."

A pause. "Ilya's going to want to say something."

"Ilya's going to want to burn the building down. That's why I'm telling you first."

Shane hung up. He stood in the kitchen. The coffee maker finished. He poured two cups. He carried them to the bedroom.

Ilya was on his back, one arm over his face, the way he slept when he was deeply out. Anya was on his chest, rising and falling with his breathing. The cross lay against his sternum. The room was quiet and the curtains were drawn and for about ten more seconds this was still a morning where the only problem was Game 5.

Shane sat on the edge of the bed. Ilya moved his arm. Opened one eye.

"Hollander. What time is it."

"Seven-twenty."

"Why are you awake at seven-twenty. We do not skate until ten."

Shane handed him the phone. Ilya took it. He looked at the screen. His face didn't change while he read, which was how Shane knew it was bad — when Ilya's face changed, it was performance. When it didn't change, the feeling had gone somewhere deeper than his face could follow.

Ilya played the clip. The tinny audio in the quiet bedroom. Anya's ears twitched.

He played it again.

He put the phone down.

"Fifteen years," he said. "I have played in this league for fifteen years. I have given this league my body, my knees, my shoulder, three concussions. I have made them millions. I have sold tickets and jerseys and I have stood at center ice and played their anthem and smiled for their cameras, and this man — this man who has never laced a skate in his life — thinks I am ruining his sport."

His voice was quiet. Not calm. Quiet the way a room is quiet when something has been turned off.

"What do you want to do?" Shane said.

"I want to score four goals tonight and dedicate every one of them to Roger Crowell and his fucking owners' meeting."

"After that."

Ilya sat up. Anya slid off his chest and gave him a wounded look. He pulled Shane toward him, pressed his forehead against Shane's temple. Stayed there.

"After that," he said, "I want this man to resign. And I want every player in this league who has ever been afraid to be who they are to watch him resign. I want them to see it. I want the door to open and I want it to stay open and I want Roger Crowell to understand that he was standing in the doorway and we moved him."

Shane turned his head. Their mouths were close.

"We'll move him," Shane said.

"— folks, I want to be very clear about what we're playing. This was recorded, we're told, at the annual owners' meeting in Scottsdale, Arizona, approximately three weeks ago. The voice has been confirmed as Commissioner Roger Crowell. We're going to play the clip in its entirety, and I want to warn listeners that it contains a homophobic slur. Here it is."

[clip plays]

"Fitz, I'll be honest, I'm — I don't even know where to start."

"Danny, we have been on this show for four hundred and thirty-some episodes and we have always — always — said that the game should be about the game. We have pushed back on what we saw as political messaging from players and from the league. We have asked hard questions about the direction of the sport. I stand by those questions. But this — this is not a question. This is the commissioner of the league using a slur to describe players. His players. Players who have given everything to this sport."

"I don't disagree, Fitz. I've been critical of the Rozanov-Hollander platform and I'm not walking that back. But there's a difference between asking questions and — and this. This is a man who's

supposed to represent every player in the league, and he's calling them — I can't even say it. And the Hunter comment. 'At least Hunter has the grace to retire.' Scott Hunter. Two-time Cup champion. One of the greatest centers to ever play. And the commissioner thinks his retirement is — what? A favor? A convenience?"

"There are going to be calls for Crowell to resign. I'm making one right now. On this show. This is not a political statement. This is a hockey statement. If you cannot represent all of your players — all of them — you cannot be commissioner. Period."

"I agree. And I know that's going to surprise some of our listeners, given what we've said on this show. But there's a line, and Crowell crossed it, and the line is not complicated: you don't use that word. Ever. About anyone. And you especially don't use it about players who have done more for this league's relevance and visibility than Roger Crowell has done in his entire tenure."

"When we come back: Game 5, Ottawa-New York. The series is tied and there's a game tonight and these players have to go play it. My God. Stay with us."

— Top Shelf with Brewer and Fitz, Episode 441: "The Tape"

Game 5.

The building was different. Not louder — Ottawa's building was always loud in the playoffs — but different in pitch, in texture. Signs everywhere. The **KEEP POLITICS OFF THE ICE** signs were gone. In their place: rainbow flags. Handmade posters. A bedsheet banner in section 104 that read **WE HEARD YOU, ROGER. NOW HEAR US.** A little girl in the front row wearing a Rozanov 81 jersey and holding a sign that said **MY HERO** in purple marker.

When Ottawa took the ice for warmups, the building stood. Not just the cheering — people rose from their seats the way they do for a national anthem, which this wasn't, but felt like one. Seventeen

thousand people standing because two men had been told they were ruining this sport and had shown up anyway.

Shane felt it in his chest. Not pride — something rawer, less shaped. He took his warmup laps, went through his stretches, fed pucks to Wyatt. Ilya was across the ice doing the same, not acknowledging it, not performing. But Shane saw his jaw, the set of it. The teeth together behind the closed mouth.

Ilya scored twice. Shane had three assists. Ottawa won 5-2 and the building didn't sit down for the entire third period.

Ottawa won Game 6 in New York, 3-2. When the horn sounded and the ice opened up and the lines formed for the handshake, Shane went through it on autopilot — hand after hand, good series, good series, hell of a series — until he reached the end of the New York line and Scott Hunter was standing there.

Scott was thirty-six. Six-two, dark hair damp with sweat, blue eyes red. Not crying — past it, in the flat place after. He had the face of a man who'd been carrying something for twenty years and had just set it down, and the setting down had aged him more than the carrying. Two Cups. Number 21. Captain of the Admirals since before Shane was drafted. The man who'd kissed Kip Grady on the ice after winning the first one and made it possible for everyone who came after.

Shane stopped. The line moved around them. Cameras everywhere. Seventeen thousand people in New York who'd just watched their captain lose his last series and were making a sound that wasn't cheering or booing but something in between, something like grief with a beat.

Shane took Scott's hand. Then he let go of it and pulled him in. A hug. On the ice, in front of the cameras, in front of the league that Roger Crowell thought belonged to him. Scott was taller and for a second he held on, his glove on the back of Shane's neck, his head

bent, and whatever he said was too quiet for the microphones but Shane heard it.

"Take care of it," Scott said. "The whole thing. Take care of it."

"We will."

Scott let go. He straightened up. Found the camera and gave it the grin — the Scott Hunter grin, the one that had sold a million jerseys, the one that belonged to Rochester and New York and every kid who'd ever been afraid — and skated to center ice and raised his stick to the crowd and the crowd gave him everything they had. His last lap. The lights and the noise and the gratitude of a building that knew what it was losing. Somewhere in the stands, Kip Grady was watching the man he'd married circle the ice for the last time, and he was taking notes, because Kip was always taking notes, and somewhere down the road those notes would become a book called *Love and Hockey.*

Ilya was waiting at the bench. He pulled Shane close.

"What did he say?"

"He said take care of it."

"It?"

"All of it. The whole thing."

Ilya nodded. He looked out at the ice, where Scott Hunter was making his last lap, where the lights were bright and the crowd was standing and the commissioner's office in Manhattan was probably dark and definitely panicking.

"Okay," Ilya said. "We take care of it."

The calls for Roger Crowell to resign reached critical mass that night. Twenty-seven players issued public statements. The Players' Association demanded an emergency meeting. Three sponsors suspended partnerships with the league pending "review of organizational leadership."

Scott Hunter, from his apartment in New York, posted a single-sentence statement on Instagram: *I gave this league everything. It owed me nothing. But it owes the players who are still there everything, and right now it is failing them.*

It got fourteen million likes in twelve hours.

Kip reposted it with no caption.

Shane read all of it at midnight, in bed, with Ilya asleep beside him. His hands were steady. His spreadsheet was open. He added a new tab: CROWELL.

The Conference Finals were next. Ottawa vs. Boston. Ilya's old team. The Bears.

Eighteen months. A number. A door.

And behind it, a country that didn't know yet whether it wanted to let them in.

Ilya

Chapter 5: Ilya

The commissioner falls. His replacement is someone nobody saw coming. Ottawa faces Ilya's old team, a new enemy on the airwaves, and a Cup Finals opponent with nothing to lose — while the people who were told this sport wasn't theirs show up to claim it anyway.

They fired him on a Tuesday.

Not fired. The word the league used was "separated," which Ilya thought was a very Canadian way to describe a man being thrown out of a building he'd walked into for eleven years. Roger Crowell had been the commissioner for longer than Ilya had played in Ottawa, longer than he and Shane had been public, longer than the cross around Ilya's neck had been anything other than his dead mother's necklace.

And now he was gone because someone had left a microphone on in Scottsdale, Arizona, and Roger Crowell had used six seconds of that open microphone to say what he apparently said in private all the time.

The fags are ruining this sport.

Ilya was eating cereal when Shane told him. Not because Shane had just found out — Shane had known for hours, maybe since the previous night, because Shane slept with his phone on the nightstand and his notifications sorted by threat level. Shane told him over breakfast because Shane understood something about Ilya that most people missed: Ilya processed things better with food in his hands. Ilya didn't know if this was true. He thought it might be one of

Shane's theories about him that had hardened into fact through repetition. But the cereal did help.

"Board voted last night," Shane said. He was standing at the counter with his coffee, still in the clothes he'd slept in, which for Shane meant a clean t-shirt and shorts with no wrinkles. "Unanimous."

"Unanimous," Ilya repeated. He let the word sit. He ate another spoonful. Anya was under the table, pressed against his bare foot, which was her position when she sensed something had changed in the house. Anya sensed everything. She was fifteen pounds of terrier-shepherd mix with an anxiety disorder and enormous brown eyes that made her look like she was perpetually waiting for someone to explain the situation.

"Jinky says it was the sponsors," Shane said. "Three pulled out last week, two more threatened Friday. The math got simple."

"It is always math."

"Usually."

Ilya looked at the window above the sink. Spring light, hard and clean, the maple in the backyard still bare. Conference Finals started Thursday. Boston. His old team, his old building, his old life sitting across from him in a different jersey.

"Fifteen years," Ilya said. "I play in this league fifteen years, and this man thinks I am ruining his sport."

He'd said this before. The night it happened, in the hotel, Shane sitting on the edge of the bed with his hands steady and his phone already open to a new tab. The words had meant something different then — hotter, more ragged. Now they just felt like a fact. Like something he'd carry from here forward, a small stone in his pocket.

Shane didn't respond to that. He sipped his coffee. This was one of the things about Shane that had taken Ilya years to understand:

silence was not absence. Silence was Shane choosing not to fill the space with something that wouldn't help.

Anya pressed harder against his foot.

The replacement came two days later.

Ilya was in the locker room, pre-skate, lacing up while Wyatt argued with Zane about whether the league would hire from inside or outside. Wyatt thought inside — someone from the competition committee, maybe, or a former governor general with good hair. Zane thought outside. "They need distance," Zane said. "Nobody who shook Crowell's hand at the Christmas party."

"Everyone shook his hand at the Christmas party," Wyatt said. "That's how Christmas parties work."

"Not me," Zane said. "I was at the dessert table."

"You're always at the dessert table."

"And I have never shaken a bigot's hand at a league function. Dessert table, Wyatt. Remember that."

It was Harris who walked in with his phone and a face that looked like he'd run up three flights of stairs. Ilya saw it before Harris said anything — the slight wideness around the eyes, the way his mouth was already half-open.

"Rosalind Villeneuve-Trudeau," Harris said.

The room went quiet.

Not the kind of quiet that meant confusion. The kind that meant everyone was processing the same information and landing in the same place.

"You're shitting me," Wyatt said.

"Commissioner," Harris said. He held up his phone as if the screen would make it more real. "Official in twenty minute. Press conference at four."

Ilya knew the name. Everyone in Canadian hockey knew the name, and most people in hockey period. Three Olympic golds with Team Canada — not coaching, *playing.* She'd been on the ice. She'd taken hits. She'd bled for those medals before women's hockey was anything anyone took seriously, back when the facilities were afterthoughts and the funding was a joke and the only people watching were the families who drove eight hours to sit in bleachers that didn't have heat.

After the medals, she'd coached. After coaching women's hockey for a decade, she'd done what no woman had done — she'd taken the bench for the Chicago Crushers. A men's team. A major league team. Four seasons, playoffs twice, and a reputation that Ilya had heard described in exactly one way by every player who'd played for her: *fair*.

Fifty-nine years old. Tough as carbon steel and twice as precise.

"Her husband was an Admiral," Ilya said. He was still lacing, his fingers working automatically. Jean-Michel Trudeau. Retired defenseman, long career, one of the steady guys who never made the All-Star game but played eighteen seasons because coaches trusted him.

"Son plays for Montreal," Troy said from across the room. "Jean-Claude. Winger."

"And Marc-André is in Toronto," Harris added. "She's got family in three organizations. Nobody can call her partisan."

"They picked the person nobody can argue with," Zane said, and he said it without his usual warmth — he said it with respect, the kind of respect Zane reserved for things that were genuinely well done.

Wiebe walked in. The room looked at him. Wiebe's face was doing exactly what Wiebe's face always did, which was nothing, and the nothing today felt different.

"Conference Finals starts Thursday," Wiebe said. "You've all seen the news. Good. Now put your fucking skates on."

Top Shelf with Brewer and Fitz — Episode 445: "New Era"

BREWER: So. Rosalind Villeneuve-Trudeau.

FITZ: Yeah.

BREWER: Three-time gold medalist. First woman behind a men's bench. And now first woman running the league. I gotta be honest, I did not see this coming.

FITZ: I think that's the point. After the Crowell audio, the board needed someone who couldn't be questioned. Someone where the résumé speaks for itself. And her résumé doesn't just speak — it kind of shuts you up.

BREWER: I want to say something here and I want to be careful about it. We pushed hard on Crowell. We played the tape. We called for his resignation. I stand by all of that. But I also think we spent a lot of this season being the loudest voice in the room, and I think it's worth acknowledging that loud isn't always right. There are things we got right and there are things we could've been more thoughtful about.

FITZ: Agreed. And I think with the new commissioner, there's a chance to actually move forward instead of just yelling about what's broken. I'm cautiously optimistic. I know that's boring radio.

BREWER: It's the most boring thing you've ever said.

FITZ: I know. I'll be funnier next week.

But not everyone moderated.

Jinky flagged it three days after the Crowell firing — a new podcast called *Real Hockey*, hosted by two former minor-league players whose names Ilya didn't bother to remember and a retired equipment manager who apparently had opinions about everything. Small listenership. Sixty thousand, maybe seventy. But concentrated.

"It's a closed loop," Jinky had said on the group call, same Monster Energy, same face too close to the camera. "Top Shelf backed off. Their audience is splitting. The people who were there for actual hockey analysis, they're staying. The people who were there for the anger — they're migrating. And *Real Hockey* is where they're going."

"How bad?" Shane asked. Shane was taking notes. Shane was always taking notes.

"They're not subtle," Jinky said. "Top Shelf asked questions. These guys make statements. 'Hockey is for players, not platforms.' 'When did skating become secondary to social messaging?' It's the same playbook but the mask is off. And their comment sections..." Jinky trailed off, then shrugged. "Their comment sections are like if a Reddit thread got a podcast deal."

"So what do we do?" Harris asked. He was on the call from Troy's couch, Troy beside him with his hand on Harris's knee.

Jinky smiled. It was the kind of smile that preceded something either brilliant or deranged. "I've been recruiting."

"Recruiting what?" Farrah asked.

"Hockey queens," Jinky said. "Gay hockey fans. Queer women who've been watching this sport since they were nine and never had anyone to cheer for. Trans fans. Bi fans. The LGBTQ hockey community online is enormous and it's organized and it has *opinions*

and it has been waiting for someone to give them a target. I gave them a target."

"Jinky," Farrah said.

"I have forty-seven accounts mobilized across four platforms. They are loud, they are funny, they are relentless, and they make the *Real Hockey* guys look like what they are — three dudes in a basement who are mad that the sport they love loved someone back who doesn't look like them."

Harris was staring at Jinky's face on the screen with an expression Ilya couldn't quite read. Admiration, maybe. Or recognition. Harris had been fighting this fight for years from inside the organization — the official way, the press releases and the carefully worded statements. Jinky was fighting it from the internet's trenches with a water army of old lesbians and hockey moms and seventeen-year-olds with rainbow profile pictures who could ratio a *Real Hockey* clip in under six minutes.

"All sass but zero ass," Jinky said, which was what they always said about themselves. "But I have the internet's ass. And the internet's ass is large."

Shane, on his end of the call, was quiet for a moment. Then: "Send me the data."

Of course.

Pub night was Troy's idea.

Not a bar crawl, not a team thing — just three of them at Connelly's, which was an Irish pub on Elgin that had good pints and bad lighting and a bartender named Gordie who had been pouring for Ottawa players long enough that he never looked twice.

Ilya, Troy, Zane. Three men at a high top in the back corner, a pitcher between them, playoff beards coming in. Troy's was neat. Zane's was thick and even. Ilya's was what Ilya's always was — just enough to look deliberate, not enough to look like he was trying.

"You ready for Thursday?" Zane asked.

"I am always ready," Ilya said.

"He means are you ready for Boston specifically," Troy said. "Your old team. Your old building. Cliff."

"Cliff," Ilya said, and he smiled, because thinking about Cliff always made him smile. Cliff Marlow was a year younger than him, an alternate captain, a forward who played with more energy than strategy, and probably still Ilya's best friend outside of Ottawa. Cliff watched celebrity gossip shows while working out. Cliff had once argued with a teammate for fifteen minutes about a tabloid article about Shane and Rose Landry. Cliff had also, in April of 2017, checked Shane Hollander into the boards at exactly the wrong angle and sent him to the hospital with a broken collarbone and a concussion.

Shane had forgiven him almost immediately. "He's not a vicious player," Shane had said from the hospital bed, and he was right — Cliff wasn't vicious, he was fast and a little careless and the hit had been clean but wrong angle.

Ilya had visited the next day. He'd stood in the doorway of Shane's hospital room like an idiot, terrified that a nurse would ask why the opposing team's captain was there, terrified that someone would see his face and know. Shane had been high as a kite on painkillers. His eyes were glassy and his smile was the dopey, unguarded thing that only appeared when Shane Hollander's defenses were chemically offline. He'd looked at Ilya and said, *Come to the cottage this summer. Don't go to Russia. Come to the cottage*.

Ilya had said maybe. He'd said maybe because he was a coward and because saying yes meant admitting something he wasn't ready to admit. He went back to Boston and finished the season and spent two weeks telling himself he was going to Moscow.

Then Scott Hunter won the Stanley Cup and kissed Kip Grady on the ice on live television in front of the entire world, and Ilya had watched it from his apartment in Boston and called Shane and said yes.

The cottage was where everything changed. The cottage was where they stopped being a secret they couldn't name and started being two people trying to figure out how to keep each other.

Ilya had never thanked Cliff for any of this. He never would. But the connection existed somewhere in the back of his head, and it surfaced every time he saw Cliff's name on an opposing roster.

"Cliff will be fine," Ilya said. "He will try to fight me during warmups and then ask about my dog after the game."

"Your dog is named Anya," Zane said, "and she destroyed my best sandals at your last barbecue."

"She was making a statement," Ilya said. "She does not respect Birkenstocks."

They drank. They talked about the series — how Boston's defense had been shaky since January, how Brad Hammersmith was somehow still playing at whatever age Brad Hammersmith was, how the crowd in Boston was going to be loud and hostile and wonderful because there was nothing in hockey like a hostile crowd when you were winning.

There was a pause. Zane refilled his glass from the pitcher, slow and careful the way Zane did everything. Zane had been with Ottawa since 2014 — co-captain, the longest-tenured player on the team. He had Cassie, and Milo who was three now and already had opinions about everything, and a house in Kanata with the best deck

on the street. Zane was the kind of steady that didn't announce itself. He'd just always been there.

"Can I ask you something?" Zane said.

"You are already asking."

"You and Shane. You ever think about kids?"

Ilya's hand went to his glass. Not to drink — just to hold something. The condensation was cold against his palm.

Troy was watching him. Troy, who was so careful about when he spoke that Ilya sometimes forgot he was there until he said something that mattered.

"We talk about it," Ilya said. He said it slowly, because this was a slow thing — this was a thing that lived in the quiet spaces between him and Shane, in the dark of their bedroom after the lights went off, in the kitchen on Sunday mornings when Ilya was cooking and Shane was reading the news and neither of them was saying anything but both of them were thinking about the same thing. He knew Shane was thinking about it because Shane had started a file. Shane always started a file.

"Not yet," Ilya said. "After the citizenship. When everything is settled."

"When you're Canadian," Zane said, and he said it like it was a simple thing, like it was already true, like he was just confirming the schedule.

"When I am Canadian," Ilya agreed.

He took a drink. The beer was cold and ordinary and good. Across the bar, someone had put on a hockey highlight reel and the sound was low enough that Ilya could hear the puck hits without hearing the

commentary, which was how he preferred hockey on television — the sounds without the opinions.

Kids. A child in the house on their street in Ottawa, the one with the big backyard where they'd gotten married. A kid who would grow up bilingual, maybe trilingual if Ilya was stubborn about it, which he would be. A kid who would learn to skate on the canal in winter and eat pelmeni and know what the cross around Ilya's neck meant.

But first, citizenship. First, the eighteen months. First, the door had to open.

"I would be a very good father," Ilya said.

"You would be insane," Zane said. "Your child would be feral."

"My child would be magnificent."

"Your child would eat dessert for breakfast," said Troy.

"My child would eat dessert for breakfast *and be correct*."

Zane laughed. It was a good laugh — big, warm, the kind that came from a man who knew what it meant to care for someone so small and was inviting you into the mess of it. Ilya loved that laugh. He loved this — three men at a table, talking about the future like it was real. Like it was coming.

Yuna called the next morning.

Ilya was in the kitchen, making eggs because Shane was in the shower and Ilya cooked when he was restless and there was nothing else to do with his hands. The phone vibrated on the counter and the screen said YUNA HOLLANDER and Ilya picked up before it rang twice because you didn't leave Yuna waiting. Nobody left Yuna waiting.

"Conference Finals," Yuna said, by way of greeting.

"Yes."

"Boston."

"Yes."

"How are you feeling about it?"

Ilya cracked an egg one-handed. "I am feeling that they have a weak blue line and we have Fred Johnson."

Yuna made a sound that was almost a laugh. "David says you should watch their fourth line. He says they've been cycling well since the trade deadline."

"David watches Boston's fourth line?"

"David watches everything. He's your father-in-law. He worries."

Ilya felt something warm behind his sternum. David Hollander worried. David Hollander, who worked at the Treasury Board of Canada and played hockey at McGill and discovered his son kissing a Russian man in the cottage while looking for a phone charger and never once — not once — made Ilya feel like a problem. David Hollander watched Boston's fourth line because his son-in-law was about to play them.

"Tell David I will watch the fourth line," Ilya said.

"I already told him you would. He's been sending Shane video clips since Tuesday." A pause. "We're coming to Game 1. We'll be in the family section."

"Yuna."

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For everything."

She was quiet for a moment. Not a silence that needed filling.

"Win," she said. "That's all the thanks I need."

She hung up. Ilya stared at the phone. The eggs were sizzling. Shane came out of the shower in a towel, his hair wet, freckles dark across his nose.

"Was that my mom?" Shane asked.

"She told me to watch Boston's fourth line."

"She told me the same thing. She's been talking to my dad."

"Your father is a very thorough man."

"He sent me thirteen clips."

"Thirteen?"

"Thirteen." Shane took the coffee Ilya had already poured for him — black, no sugar, in the blue mug that was Shane's mug because it had been Shane's mug for five years and God help anyone who used Shane's mug. "Ilya."

"Hm?"

"We're going to win this."

Ilya looked at him. Shane in their kitchen in a towel with his coffee and his wet hair and his certainty. The same certainty he'd had at seventeen in a rink in Saskatchewan, the same certainty he'd had on an exercise bike at the draft in LA.

"I know," Ilya said.

He said it because it was true and because Shane was beautiful and because the eggs were going to burn if he didn't stop looking at his husband.

He didn't stop looking at his husband. The eggs burned.

Conference Finals: Ottawa vs. Boston — Game 1

The building in Boston hit different when you'd played there.

Ilya had spent nine seasons in this arena. He knew the boards. He knew the dead spots on the ice, the way the glass rattled in sections 104 and 105, the sound the crowd made when they were angry versus when they were afraid. He'd won a Cup here in 2014. He'd been a god here, briefly, the way hockey players are gods — for a season, in a city, wearing the right colors.

He was wearing the wrong colors now.

Warmups. Ilya found Cliff across the ice, the same way he always did — not looking for him, exactly, but knowing where he'd be. Cliff was near the far blue line, stretching, his jersey untucked on one side because Cliff had been wearing his jersey untucked on one side for thirteen years and nobody had bothered to correct it.

Cliff looked up. Caught Ilya's eye. Grinned.

Ilya didn't grin back. Not yet. Game face. But his chest loosened a fraction, because Cliff Marlow grinning at him across an opposing rink was one of the only things in hockey that had never changed.

The crowd booed Ilya when his name was announced. Not the polite visiting-team boo — the real one, the one with teeth, the one that meant *you used to be ours and you left.* Ilya raised his stick. He always raised his stick. He'd been doing it since his first game back

in this building, and the crowd hated it and he loved that they hated it.

Shane was at center ice for the opening faceoff. Shane who was quiet before games, who processed the building and the energy and the opponent's lineup silently, totally, with a result that appeared as action rather than words. Shane who had forgiven Cliff Marlow years ago but who still, every time they played Boston, put his hand on his right collarbone for half a second before the puck dropped. He probably didn't know he did it. Ilya knew.

Game 1 was a fight.

Boston came out fast — faster than the scouting said, faster than the film showed, the kind of fast that meant they'd been saving something for this series. Their fourth line was cycling exactly the way David said they would, which meant Ilya owed David a bottle of wine or possibly a lifetime of gratitude.

But Ottawa had something Boston didn't. Ottawa had a captain and a center who had been reading each other on ice since they were seventeen years old.

Ilya couldn't explain what happened between him and Shane on the ice. He'd tried once, in an interview early in their first Ottawa season, and the answer had come out wrong — too clinical, too measured, nothing like the real thing.

The real thing was that Ilya always knew where Shane was. Not because he looked. Because he *knew*. The way you know where your own hands are in the dark. Shane moved and Ilya's body responded before his brain caught up. Shane read a play and Ilya was already in the lane.

It wasn't strategy. It wasn't coaching. It was something that had been built over fifteen years of playing against each other and then with each other, and it was the reason that Wiebe and Fred would sometimes stand behind the bench during a Hollander-Rozanov shift

and just watch, not saying anything, because what could you say about something like that?

Fred had said it once, to Ilya, after a game where Shane and Ilya had combined for six points on a night when nobody else on the team had more than one. Fred had waited until the room cleared and then said, "You two are the best thing I've ever seen on an ice surface."

Ilya had said, "I know."

Fred had said, "Don't let it make you lazy."

That was Fred.

The first goal came at 14:32 of the first period. Shane won the faceoff clean — he won most faceoffs clean, it was the thing scouts still couldn't figure out, how a five-ten center consistently won draws against men who outweighed him by thirty pounds. The puck went back to Zane at the point. Zane cycled to Luca. Luca looked left, looked right, and then fed it through a seam that shouldn't have existed to Ilya, who was already moving because Ilya always knew where the seam would be when Shane won the draw. One touch. Top corner. The building went silent.

Ilya pointed at Shane. He always pointed at Shane after a goal, had been doing it since their first season playing together, and it drove the commentators crazy because it was intimate and public and you couldn't look at it without understanding something about these two men.

Shane pointed back. Small. Quick. His hand barely left the bench. But Ilya saw it.

Ottawa won Game 1, 3-1. Ilya had a goal and an assist. Shane had two assists. Luca had the third goal — a breakaway generated by a Fred-designed neutral zone trap that was becoming Ottawa's

signature. After the game, in the handshake line, Cliff grabbed Ilya's hand and pulled him in.

"You're still the best player I've ever played with, you Russian bastard," Cliff said.

"I know," Ilya said. "How is your eTalk?"

"They cancelled it."

"I am devastated for you."

"Fuck off."

"Okay. Good series, Cliff."

Cliff's hand tightened for a second. "Good series, Roz."

Ottawa took the series in six. Games 3 and 4 in Ottawa were battles — Boston won Game 3 in overtime when Hammersmith, who was approximately a hundred and fifty years old, scored on a redirect that nobody saw coming including, apparently, Hammersmith himself. Ottawa won Game 4 and 6. By Game 5, the building in Ottawa had started doing something Ilya had never seen — whole sections showing up in rainbow.

Not coordinated by the team, not organized by marketing. Just fans. LGBTQ+ hockey fans who'd come from Toronto, from Montreal, from Winnipeg, from places Ilya had never heard of, wearing Centaurs jerseys customized with rainbow numbers or pride tape on the sleeves.

There was a section in the upper deck — 312, 313 — that had become, by some unspoken consensus, the queer section. They were loud. They had chants. They had signs. One sign, held by a woman in her sixties with short gray hair and a Rozanov 81 jersey, said: **HOCKEY HAS ALWAYS BEEN OURS.**

Jinky's work. Jinky's water army had crossed from the internet to the arena. The queens had come to the rink.

In the handshake line after Game 6, Cliff found Ilya again.

"Go win the whole fucking thing," Cliff said. His beard was longer than Ilya had ever seen it. He looked exhausted and proud and a little like he was trying to hold it together.

"I will," Ilya said.

Then Ilya found Shane, who was already moving toward him on the ice because Shane always moved toward him, and Ilya grabbed him and kissed the side of his head — quick, hard, his mouth pressed against Shane's temple where the sweat and the helmet had matted his dark hair. Not a statement. Not for cameras. Just the impulse of a man whose body knew what his body always knew after a win, which was that the first thing he wanted to touch was Shane.

Shane's hand came up to the back of Ilya's neck. Stayed for a second. Let go.

Conference Finals. Done. Boston. Done.

The Cup Finals were next.

Real Hockey Podcast — Episode 12: "The Commissioner Question"

HOST 1: So they replaced one guy with a woman who played a different sport.

HOST 2: Women's hockey. Which is essentially a different sport.

HOST 1: Different speed, different physicality, different league. And now she's running the show? She's supposed to understand what these guys go through on the ice?

HOST 3: She coached a men's team.

HOST 1: For four seasons. And what'd she win? Nothing. Made the playoffs twice. Big deal.

HOST 2: Look, I'm not saying she isn't qualified on paper—

HOST 1: I am. I'm saying exactly that. This is a diversity hire and everyone knows it.

HOST 3: Her husband played eighteen years—

HOST 1: So she married well. Great. That's not a qualification.

HOST 2: What I'm saying is, the timing. The league has a PR problem because of the Crowell thing. So what do they do? They hire someone who's — look, I'll say it — she checks every box. Woman, bilingual, Olympic hero, the whole package. This isn't about hockey. This is about messaging.

HOST 1: Meanwhile the actual hockey guys, the guys in the rooms, the guys who've bled for this sport — nobody asked them.

HOST 3: I mean, the Board of Governors is literally made up of—

HOST 1: Next segment. Colorado's in the Finals for the first time. Let's talk about actual hockey.

Colorado came for everything.

The Cup Finals opened in Ottawa, and Ilya understood within the first five minutes that this was not going to be like Boston. Boston had been emotional — ghosts, old friendships, the complicated archaeology of Ilya's past. Colorado had none of that. Colorado had a team full of twenty-four-year-olds who had never been to the Finals and had no idea they were supposed to be nervous.

Matheson was their captain. Canadian, All-Star, the kind of player who didn't look like much until you watched him dismantle a

forecheck like he was solving a problem nobody else had noticed. Ilya had played against him for years and had always thought he was underrated, which was the most dangerous thing a player could be.

And they had Bogrov. Ilya hadn't played with Bogrov — different generation, different program — but he'd seen him at the World Championship two years ago. Young. Russian. A wrist shot that arrived before the goalie knew it had left the blade. After one practice, Fred had pulled up Bogrov's release film and shown it to Wyatt and said, "He's going to shoot from here. Every time. Don't guess. Just be there."

"What if I'm not there?" Wyatt had asked.

"Then he'll score more than we do," Fred said.

Classic Fred.

"They're fast," Fred told the room before Game 1. Fred Johnson, assistant coach, forty-one years old, from Pembroke, thin, glasses, inhaler in his jacket pocket, one earbud in. Fred who had never played hockey and told Ilya he coasted after forty minutes and was right. "They're going to push the pace and they're going to try to make you play their game. Don't."

"What is their game?" Luca asked.

"Speed without structure," Fred said. "They're fast because they're young. We're fast because we're good."

Ottawa lost Game 1.

Colorado won it 4-2, and they won it by being exactly what Fred said — fast, relentless, playing with the freedom of a team that had never been here and didn't know they could lose. Bogrov scored twice. Matheson had three assists. The building was stunned.

Ilya sat in the room afterward and said nothing. He changed out of his gear slowly. Shane was two stalls down, head bowed, doing the thing Shane did after losses — sitting completely still, replaying every shift.

"Game 2," Ilya said to him. Just that.

Shane nodded. Just that.

Game 2 was different.

Fred had spent the day between games in his office with the door closed and one earbud in, watching Colorado film frame by frame, and what he brought to the room was not a speech. It was three sentences.

"Their center cheats left on the breakout. Their goalie drops early on cross-ice passes. Their power play runs through Bogrov and if you take his lane he doesn't have a second option."

Three sentences. Fred turned off the projector. Walked out.

Wiebe, from the doorway: "You heard the man."

Game 2: Ottawa, 3-1.

Shane won eleven of thirteen faceoffs. Ilya took Bogrov's lane on the penalty kill and watched him look for the pass that wasn't there — watched him hesitate, recalculate, and by then Zane had poked the puck free and they were going the other way. Luca scored his first career playoff goal on a breakaway that started with a Fred-designed neutral zone trap, and when he came back to the bench he was shaking and trying not to smile and Ilya grabbed his face with both hands and said, "Remember this."

The series went seven.

Seven games. Four cities — Ottawa, Ottawa, Colorado, Colorado, Ottawa, Colorado, Ottawa. The kind of series that years later people would call the best they'd ever seen, not because of any single moment but because of the accumulation — the way both teams refused to give an inch, the way every game was a complete war, the way by Game 5 even the commentary had run out of hyperbole.

Colorado won Game 3 in overtime. Ottawa won Game 4 on a Zane goal with twelve seconds left. Colorado won Game 5 with a Matheson hat trick that was, objectively, one of the greatest individual performances Ilya had ever seen. He told Shane this in bed that night, staring at the hotel ceiling in Colorado, and Shane said, "He was incredible," and there was no bitterness in it, just a man who loved hockey recognizing the sport at its best even when it was beating him.

Ilya rolled onto his side. Shane was on his back, one arm behind his head, staring at the ceiling the way he stared at spreadsheets — like the answer was in there somewhere if he just looked long enough.

"Hey," Ilya said.

"Hm?"

"Stop looking at the ceiling. The ceiling does not have a game plan."

"I'm not—"

"You are. You are staring at the ceiling like it owes you a goal." Ilya reached over and put his hand on Shane's chest, over the heartbeat. "We are down three-two in the Stanley Cup Finals and I am lying next to the best center in the league and he is ignoring me for a ceiling."

Shane turned his head. His mouth twitched. "The second-best center in the league."

"Ah. So now you are modest."

"You're the center. I'm *a* center."

"You are *the* center. There is no other."

Shane's hand found Ilya's on his chest. He laced their fingers together. They lay like that for a while, the hotel humming around them, the Colorado night outside the window.

"I'm scared," Shane said. Quiet. Not ashamed of it — just stating it, the way Shane stated facts.

"I know."

"If we lose—"

"We will not lose."

"If we *lose*, Ilya. The narrative writes itself. The team that was more interested in politics than hockey. The captains who were too busy being famous to win."

"*The* captain," Ilya said with a scoff. "I am captain. You are center."

"You know what I mean."

"I know what you mean. And I know what is true, which is different. What is true is that we are the best team in this league. What is true is that Colorado is very good and they are young and they do not get tired. What is true is that we have Fred Johnson and Fred Johnson has watched more film of this team than their own mothers have. And what is true is that I am going to win this because I have been playing hockey since I was 8 and I have won this before and I will win it again and the only thing different this time is that you are here."

Shane didn't say anything for a moment.

"That was a good speech," he said.

"I am very good at speeches."

"You're an idiot."

"I am *your* idiot. This is established."

Shane squeezed his hand. Ilya pressed his thumb against the cross with his free hand. They fell asleep like that — tangled, quiet, three-two down, and somehow not afraid.

Real Hockey Podcast — Episode 15: "Finals Update"

HOST 2: Colorado in six. I'm calling it.

HOST 1: I think you might be right. Ottawa's got the firepower, I'm not going to sit here and pretend Rozanov and Hollander aren't elite. They are. But Colorado's got that hunger. That Cinderella energy.

HOST 3: Rozanov had eight points in the Conference Finals.

HOST 1: Sure. And they almost lost to Boston.

HOST 3: They won in six.

HOST 1: On paper. But—

HOST 3: They. Won. In six.

HOST 1: Fine. But I'll say this. If Ottawa wins this series, it won't be because of the political stuff, the messaging, the commissioner stuff. It'll be because they've got two genuinely elite hockey players. And I've always said that. Hockey first.

HOST 3: You literally said last week that their game was secondary to their platform.

HOST 1: Next topic.

Game 6, Colorado. Must-win.

Ilya woke up at 5 a.m. in the hotel and Shane was already awake, sitting in the desk chair with the room's lamp on and his laptop open, watching film with the sound off. He was wearing Ilya's hoodie, which was too big in the shoulders and too long in the arms and which Shane had been stealing for years.

"Come back to bed," Ilya said.

"In a minute."

"Is not a minute. You have been awake for an hour."

"Twenty minutes."

"You are a liar. Come back to bed."

Shane turned. The light from the laptop caught his face — freckles, dark eyes, the hair that never did what it was told.

"I'm looking at their forecheck," Shane said.

"Their forecheck will still be there at seven."

"I found something."

Ilya sat up. "What?"

"Their D1 pairing. When they're pressured on the retrieval, the right defenseman pulls too far into the corner. It leaves the slot open for a half-second. Not long enough for a shot, but long enough for a redirect."

"Show me."

Shane turned the laptop toward him. They watched three clips. On the third, Ilya saw it — the gap, the moment, the half-second.

"I'll be in the slot," Ilya said.

"I know," Shane said. "I'll get you the puck."

"Come back to bed."

Shane closed the laptop. He got into bed and Ilya pulled him in, Shane's back against his chest, Shane's cold feet against his shins — their thermal arrangement set in concrete. Ilya buried his face in Shane's neck. Shane smelled like hotel soap and coffee and himself.

"We're going to win tonight," Ilya said into Shane's skin.

"We have to win tonight."

"That's what I said."

Shane's hand found Ilya's, pulled it tight against his chest. Ilya could feel Shane's heart under his palm.

He pressed his thumb against the cross. He didn't pray anymore, not in words. But he held the cross and he held Shane and he thought about doors opening and doors closing.

They lay there until the alarm went off.

Game 6: Ottawa, 4-3.

The slot play worked. Second period, tie game, Shane won the draw and Zane cycled the puck along the boards and Ilya drifted to the slot and the right defenseman pulled too far into the corner and Shane fed it through the gap and Ilya redirected it past the goalie's glove.

The arena in Colorado went silent. The Ottawa bench did not.

They won the game because they were the best players on the ice and because they'd been reading each other for half their lives and because Fred Johnson had spent sixteen hours between Games 5 and 6 finding the gap in Colorado's defense and because Wyatt

made fourteen saves in the third period that had no business being saves and because Luca played like a man who had remembered what his first playoff goal felt like and wanted to feel it again.

After the final horn, in the room, Ilya pressed his forehead against Shane's. They stood there for a moment. Foreheads together. Eyes closed. Breathing.

"One more," Shane said.

"One more."

Game 7. Ottawa.

The room before Game 7 was quiet in the way that rooms are quiet when everyone knows what's coming and nobody wants to be the one to say the wrong thing. Wiebe had given his talk — short, practical, about structure and patience and trusting the system. Fred had given his three sentences about Colorado's tendencies. The coaching staff filed out.

The room was Ilya's now.

He stood up. He didn't plan this. He never planned these things — Shane planned things, Shane rehearsed, Shane had notes. Ilya just talked.

"I won this before," Ilya said. "In 2014. In Boston. I was twenty-three years old and I lifted the Cup and I went home to an empty apartment and I ate leftover Chinese food and I sat on my couch and I thought, *this is the best thing that will ever happen to me, and I am alone.*"

The room was very still.

"I am not alone now." He looked at Zane, who had been here the longest, who had built this team beside him through every bad

season and every empty building. He looked at Troy, who had been traded here against his will and stayed because he found something worth staying for. He looked at Wyatt, who talked too much and saved everything. He looked at Luca, who was twenty-two and shaking and pretending not to be. He looked at Shane, who was sitting very still with his hands on his knees and his eyes on Ilya and his face doing the thing it did when he was feeling something too large for his body.

"I am not alone. And that is why we will win tonight. Not because we are the best team — we are, but that is not why. We win because every person in this room chose to be here. Nobody in this room is alone."

He paused. He pulled on his gloves.

"Now. Let us go play hockey. And if anyone scores before me, I will be very annoyed."

Wyatt laughed first. Then Zane. Then the room broke open and they were up, they were moving, they were tapping sticks and bumping gloves and the quiet was gone and what replaced it was the thing that only happens in a locker room before the biggest game of your life — the feeling that you are part of something and the something is about to do what it was built to do.

The building was full an hour before warmups.

Ilya had played in a lot of buildings. He had played in Montreal when the crowd wanted him dead. He had played in Boston when the crowd thought he was a god. He had played in arenas where seventeen thousand people were screaming and arenas where seventeen thousand people were silent and he had never once felt the thing he felt walking out of the tunnel for Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Finals in Ottawa.

They were standing.

All of them. Before warmups. Before a single puck had been dropped. Seventeen thousand people on their feet. Sections 312 and 313 — the queer section, Jinky's section — were a wall of rainbow, flags and signs and jerseys customized with pride tape, and they had started the standing and it had spread like a wave across the building until every section was up. Not because of a goal or a hit or a fight. Because this team existed. Because these men had showed up.

There were people in that crowd who had never been to a hockey game before this spring. People who had driven from Halifax, from Vancouver, from towns in northern Ontario that didn't have a rink within an hour. They were there because two players had been told they didn't belong and had refused to leave.

Ilya looked at Shane. Shane looked at Ilya. And for one second — just one — Shane's face cracked into something that wasn't game face, wasn't warrior, wasn't strategy. It was a man trying not to be overwhelmed by being loved this loudly.

Ilya looked away, because if he didn't he was going to cry, and you couldn't cry during warmups. There was time after.

The game was the hardest game Ilya had ever played.

Colorado had nothing to lose. They played like it. Matheson was everywhere at once. Bogrov's wrist shot was lethal from the circles. Their young defenseman — the one whose name Ilya kept not quite remembering — was playing like he'd been in the Finals ten times.

First period: 1-1. Ilya scored on a breakaway — the Rozanov, his signature, the fake backhand to forehand that he'd been doing since he was nineteen and that still worked because he was faster than the goalie expected and because he'd been practicing the move since before some of these defensemen were born. Colorado answered four minutes later.

Second period: 2-2. Shane scored. A wrist shot from the left circle that found the smallest possible gap between the goalie's pad and the post. Shane didn't celebrate. He skated back to the bench and sat down, because Shane didn't celebrate goals in a tie game in the Stanley Cup Finals. He filed them away.

Wiebe put Shane and Ilya on the ice together for the last five minutes of the second. This was not the plan. The plan had them on separate shifts, managing minutes, keeping legs fresh. But Wiebe had watched the first thirty-five minutes and he had watched Shane find Ilya in seams that didn't exist and he had watched Ilya anticipate passes Shane hadn't thrown yet and he had turned to Fred and Fred had nodded and Wiebe had sent them out together.

"Just play," Wiebe said. Which from Wiebe was a love letter.

They played. They created three scoring chances in ninety seconds. On the third, Ilya fed Shane through traffic for a shot that rang off the crossbar so hard the building flinched. The period ended tied.

Third period. Scoreboard locked. Every shift felt like it lasted an hour. Ilya's legs were burning. The cross was heavy against his chest, slick with sweat.

12:44 of the third.

Colorado turnover in their own zone. Zane picked it up. Dumped it to the corner. Shane was there first — he was always there first, five-ten and faster to the puck than anyone because Shane's first three steps were the fastest in the league and nobody had ever figured out how to fix it.

Shane dug the puck out. Looked up. Found Ilya.

Ilya was at the far post. Wrong side. Nobody throws that pass. The angle was wrong, the lane was cluttered, there were two defensemen between them and a goalie who was already reading the play.

Shane threw the pass.

It threaded through both defensemen, hit the blade of Ilya's stick, and Ilya didn't think. He didn't aim. His body knew where the net was the way his lungs knew how to breathe. One touch. Bar down. The net went in.

The sound.

Ilya had heard a lot of sounds in hockey. The silence after his first goal in Boston. The roar when he'd lifted the Cup in 2014. The noise in Ottawa when he and Shane had come out, the building deciding in real time that it was going to choose them.

This was louder. This was every sound at once. This was seventeen thousand people who had been holding their breath for three hours releasing it all at the same moment. Sections 312 and 313 were screaming so loud that Ilya could pick them out from the rest — a distinct frequency, higher, wilder, the sound of people who had never been given this and were being given it now.

Ilya didn't point at Shane. He skated straight to him. Shane was already moving, already on the ice, and they collided at center — not a hug exactly, more like two people who had been trying to get to each other for fifteen years and had finally stopped pretending there was a reason to wait.

The third period ended 3-2. Colorado pulled their goalie. Wyatt made two more saves. The horn sounded.

And the Ottawa Centaurs had won the Stanley Cup.

The ice.

Ilya had been here once before. He remembered the weight but not the joy — or he remembered the joy and the way it had curdled by

midnight, sitting alone with leftover Chinese food and no one to call. He'd spent ten years trying not to think about that night.

This was nothing like that.

The Cup was between him and Shane. The new commissioner — Rosalind Villeneuve-Trudeau, fifty-nine years old, three gold medals, the first woman to stand at that podium — presented it. Ilya was the captain. The Cup went to him first.

He lifted it.

He'd done this before. Thirty-five pounds. But it felt different now because the crowd was different and the teammates were different and the man standing three feet away was different from the absence that had been there in 2014.

Ilya skated the lap. The building roared. Confetti had started. He saw signs — **ROZANOV 81** in rainbow, **HOLLANDER 24** with a heart, **WE'RE NOT RUINING ANYTHING**. He saw sections 312 and 313 holding an enormous banner that must have taken hours to make: **THIS IS WHAT HOCKEY LOOKS LIKE.**

He brought the Cup back and handed it to Shane.

Shane took it. He lifted it over his head and his face did the thing it almost never did — it broke open, all the careful architecture falling away, and what was underneath was a man who had wanted this his entire life and was holding it and couldn't believe it was real.

Shane skated the lap. Ilya watched him go.

Shane brought the Cup back and handed it to Zane. Because Zane had been here from the beginning and had carried this team through years when no one was watching and deserved to hold it next. Zane took it and something in his face came apart — just for a second, too big for his face to hold.

And then they were on the ice together. Ilya and Shane and the confetti and the noise and seventeen thousand people and every camera in the building.

Ilya pulled Shane to him by the front of his jersey.

"We did this," Ilya said.

"We did this," Shane said.

Ilya kissed him.

Not the way Scott Hunter had kissed Kip after the 2017 Cup — not a man reaching into the crowd for the person he loved. This was two players. Two men in the same jersey, on the same ice, who had built this together from the first faceoff at the World Juniors when they were seventeen and didn't know yet that the person across from them was going to be everything.

The kiss was for the cameras and it was for them and it was for every kid watching who had been told this was impossible. It was for every closeted player sitting in a locker room somewhere watching on a phone they were pretending to scroll. It was for Scott Hunter, watching from somewhere with Kip beside him, who had done this first and alone and built the road they were standing on.

It was also just a kiss. Ilya's hand on Shane's face. Shane's fingers locked in his jersey. The cold of the ice under their skates and confetti in their hair and the sound so loud it had become something past sound.

Then Ilya saw them.

Yuna and David, coming onto the ice. Someone from the team staff was guiding them around the boards. Yuna was in a Centaurs jersey — Hollander 24, the one she'd worn every home game since Shane was traded to Ottawa — and she was crying and she was smiling and she was walking with the careful determination of a woman in

dress shoes on ice who was not going to let the ice win. David was behind her, steadier, his glasses slightly fogged from the temperature change, wearing a jacket over his Rozanov 81 jersey. Not Hollander. *Rozanov*. David Hollander was wearing his son-in-law's jersey.

Ilya's throat closed.

Yuna reached them first. She grabbed Shane — both arms, hard, the kind of hug that was more collision than embrace — and then she reached for Ilya without letting go of Shane and pulled him in and the three of them stood there on the ice, tangled, Yuna's face pressed against Ilya's chest.

"My boys," she said. She said it in the voice she used when she was too full for strategy, when the mother underneath the manager broke through. "My boys."

David arrived. He didn't say anything. He put one hand on Shane's shoulder and one on Ilya's and he stood there, steady and present and exactly himself.

"Nice game," David said finally.

Ilya laughed. It came out wet and too loud and he didn't care.

"Nice game," David said again, and he was smiling, and his eyes were red behind his glasses, and Ilya loved this man. He loved this family that had opened a door and let him in and never once asked him to be smaller to fit through it.

The confetti was still falling. The Cup was making its way through the team somewhere behind them. Zane had it, or maybe Wyatt, or maybe Troy — it didn't matter because the Cup was theirs, all of theirs, and the building was still standing and the noise had not stopped and the signs in sections 312 and 313 were so bright with color that Ilya could see them from center ice.

THIS IS WHAT HOCKEY LOOKS LIKE.

Later — hours later, past midnight, after the champagne and the interviews and the team photo and the phone calls — Ilya sat on the floor of their hotel room with his back against the bed and Shane asleep behind him and his phone in his hand.

He opened Instagram. Scott Hunter's page. The most recent post was from tonight — a photo of a television screen showing the kiss, with one line of caption: *Two is better than one.* Kip had commented a red heart. It had four million likes already.

Ilya scrolled through his mentions. Most were congratulations. Some were not. *Real Hockey's* latest episode was already up: "Ottawa Wins — But At What Cost?" Ilya looked at it for a moment. He thought about listening. He closed the app instead.

His phone buzzed. A text from Zane: *Congratulations brother. Now go make some babies.*

Ilya laughed. Quiet, so he wouldn't wake Shane.

He pressed his thumb against the cross. His mother's gold. He thought about Irina, briefly — not with words, just with her face. She would have been on the ice tonight too. She would have been there with Yuna and David, wearing his jersey, too loud, embarrassing him in Russian. She would have loved Shane. She would have loved all of it.

He thought about Alexei. His brother, in Moscow. The cop. *We do not speak*. The thought came and went, a door opening and closing in the back of his mind.

Shane shifted behind him, making the sound he made in deep sleep — a small hum, barely there. Ilya reached back without looking and put his hand on Shane's ankle.

The Cup was downstairs in the team room. The confetti was still in his hair. The eighteen months were still counting.

But tonight, Ilya Rozanov was a Stanley Cup champion for the second time, and he was Canadian in every way that mattered except the one that the government decided, and the man he loved was breathing behind him, and a family that was not the one he was born into but the one that had chosen him was twenty minutes away in a house in Ottawa where his dog was probably destroying David's slippers.

That was enough.

Shane

Chapter 6: Shane

The Cup is won, the cottage is waiting, and for two weeks the world shrinks to a lake, a kitchen, and the man Shane built his life around. Then a phone buzzes in a drawer, and a voice from Moscow reminds them that not every door should stay open.

The photograph was on every front page in Ottawa.

Not the one of them lifting the Cup — that was the sports section, above the fold, the expected image. The front page was the kiss. Ilya's hand on Shane's face, Shane's fingers in Ilya's jersey, confetti in their hair, the Cup somewhere behind them out of focus because the photographer had understood, in the way good photographers do, that the trophy was not the story.

Shane had seen the photo eleven times before noon. It was on his phone, on the television in the kitchen, on the newspaper his mom had brought over at 7 a.m. even though Shane had told her they were sleeping in. They were not sleeping in. Yuna Hollander arrived with the paper and a breakfast casserole and David arrived ten minutes later with a bottle of champagne and the reading glasses case that Anya had stolen from his coat pocket the previous week.

"Twenty-five years," Shane's mom said. She said it standing in their kitchen, holding the front page at arm's length the way she held everything she was proud of — far enough to see the whole picture. "Twenty-five years since this city had a Cup. And my boys brought it home."

Dad was on the couch, where Anya was sitting on his lap because she was fifteen pounds and had decided years ago that all laps were

hers. Ilya was leaning against the counter eating cold pelmeni from the pot with a fork because Ilya ate leftovers standing up like a man who'd grown up in a country where sitting down to eat was a privilege you didn't waste on reheated dumplings.

Ilya raised his fork. "I am very talented."

"You're eating with your hands," Mom said.

"I am eating with a fork."

"That fork has been in the pot and your mouth. You might as well eat with your hands."

"In Russia—"

"You're in Canada."

"I am in Canada," Ilya agreed, and the way he said it — soft, like it surprised him every time — made Shane's chest do something it shouldn't have been doing at 7 a.m. with both his parents in the room.

Top Shelf with Brewer and Fitz — Episode 448: "The Morning After"

BREWER: Let's talk about what we just watched. Game 7. Third period. Because I think there's a conversation being missed in all the noise and I want to have it here. Shane Hollander has now won four Stanley Cups.

FITZ: Four.

BREWER: Three with Montreal. One with Ottawa. Four Cups as a center. That's Gretzky territory. That's Messier territory. Put that in any era — any era — and you're talking about one of the best to ever play this game.

FITZ: He's in the conversation. I don't think that's controversial anymore.

BREWER: It shouldn't be. It shouldn't have been controversial two Cups ago. This is a guy who won three with Montreal before he ever wore an Ottawa jersey, and then he goes to a team that hadn't won in a quarter century and he brings it home. Whatever else you want to say about Shane Hollander — and people have said plenty — the man wins hockey games.

FITZ: And Rozanov's not exactly shabby either. Two Cups now. Led this team as captain. The synergy between those two on the ice — I mean, that pass in Game 7? Through two defensemen?

BREWER: Supernatural. I've watched it forty times. It shouldn't work. It's a bad pass. Except it's not, because Rozanov is exactly where Hollander knows he'll be, every single time. That's fifteen years of playing together. You can't coach that.

FITZ: You really can't.

BREWER: Let's talk about the Colorado series too, because it's getting lost. Colorado's forecheck in Games 3 and 4 was the best I've seen all postseason. Matheson was a monster. That was not a team that was going to roll over, and Ottawa had to earn every inch of that series.

FITZ: Matheson's Game 5 was a masterclass. Twenty-nine saves. He was standing on his head. If Colorado's power play converts even once in the third, we're having a different conversation right now.

BREWER: Exactly. And the coaching adjustments between Games 4 and 5 were surgical. The neutral zone trap they ran in Game 6 — I've never seen that executed at the NHL level like that. Somebody on that bench is doing something special.

FITZ: So where does this Cup rank for Ottawa?

BREWER: First in twenty-five years. You've got Hollander and Rozanov producing at the level they're producing. You've got Luca Haas coming into his own. Boodram finally gets a ring after — what, ten years? This is a complete team. Top to bottom.

FITZ: Agreed. And I want to say one more thing about Game 7 specifically. That goal — the pass through two D-men, the one-touch redirect — that's going in the highlight reel forever. I don't care what else happens in this league for the next twenty years. That goal is in the conversation for the best Cup-clinching goal of all time.

BREWER: Of all time. And I'll stand by that.

Real Hockey Podcast — Episode 18: "Cup Hangover"

HOST 1: So Ottawa wins and suddenly they're the greatest team ever assembled. The media's tripping over itself to crown these guys. Never mind that Colorado took them to seven. Never mind that Game 5 was a Matheson masterclass. No, let's just—

HOST 2: Let's talk about the kiss for another forty-eight hours.

HOST 1: The kiss. Right. Because that's what the Stanley Cup Finals is about now. Not the hockey. The kiss.

HOST 3: I mean, they also played incredible hockey—

HOST 1: Next segment.

Two Hockey Chicks — Episode 34: "Game 7 Breakdown (We're Still Not Over It)"

SAMMY: Okay. Game 7. Third period. 12:44. Let's do this.

TRIX: I have watched this play seventy-one times.

SAMMY: That's less than me and I'm not even embarrassed. So. Turnover in Colorado's zone. Boodram picks it up. Dumps it to the corner. Hollander is there first — obviously — because Hollander's first three steps are the fastest in the league and I will fight anyone who says otherwise.

TRIX: With what, your caramel popcorn?

SAMMY: With my vast hockey knowledge and my righteous anger, Trix. So Hollander digs it out. Now here's where it gets insane. Rozanov is at the far post. Wrong side. The passing lane is — it doesn't exist. There are two defensemen in the lane. The goalie is already reading the play. Nobody — NOBODY — throws that pass.

TRIX: Hollander throws that pass.

SAMMY: Hollander throws that pass. And it threads through both D-men and hits Rozanov's blade and he one-touches it bar-down and I screamed so loud my son started crying.

TRIX: Her son is four. He was asleep. He is no longer asleep.

SAMMY: The point is — and this is important because the Real Hockey guys keep talking about "platform" and "messaging" and whatever — that play is not messaging. That play is two elite hockey players who have been building chemistry for over a decade executing a pass that should be physically impossible. That's not politics. That's the best hockey I've ever seen. Full stop.

TRIX: Full stop. And if anyone wants to talk about how the game is being "ruined" by players who — checks notes — just won the Stanley Cup in Game 7 on a play that'll be in highlight reels for the next fifty years, I would love to hear the logic.

SAMMY: They don't have logic, Trix. They have feelings. And their feelings are hurt because hockey looks different now and different scares them.

TRIX: Anyway. Let's talk about the Colorado forecheck in the second period because nobody's breaking that down and it was fascinating —

Shane listened to the Two Hockey Chicks episode in the Land Rover on the drive to the cottage. Ilya was in the passenger seat with his bare feet on the dashboard, which Shane had asked him not to do approximately three hundred times across approximately three hundred road trips, and Anya was in her carrier in the back seat making the small worried sounds she made whenever the car moved faster than she thought was appropriate.

"These women are very smart," Ilya said, around minute twenty of the episode, when Sammy and Trix had moved into a forensic breakdown of Colorado's neutral zone entries that was more detailed than anything Fred had produced.

"They're Montreal fans," Shane said.

"Nobody is perfect."

Shane drove. The highway gave way to two-lane roads. The two-lane roads gave way to gravel. The trees got thicker and the houses got farther apart and the cell signal dropped to one bar and then to nothing.

Shane had designed the cottage himself. It was one of the first things he'd done when the money started being real money — hired an architect, bought a piece of land on the lake, ten minutes down the road from the cottage his parents had vacationed in when Shane was growing up. He'd spent six months on the plans.

Every detail was deliberate: the layout of the kitchen, the width of the doorframes, the placement of the windows so the morning light hit the counter and the evening light hit the porch. He'd designed a space built around the things that calmed him — controlled sight lines, predictable routines, everything where it should be.

What he hadn't understood then, and what he understood now, was that he'd also designed it for Ilya. The mas ter bedroom that became their bedroom. The kitchen wide enough for two people to cook without touching unless they wanted to. The porch swing that was exactly the right width. He'd built the cottage years before Ilya had ever set foot in it, and somehow every choice he'd made had left room for a person he hadn't admitted he was waiting for.

Shane thought about that sometimes. The first summer. Picking Ilya up at the airport, the two-hour drive north, Ilya in the passenger seat looking out the window and saying almost nothing, which was so unlike him that Shane had known he was terrified. They'd been sleeping together for years by then — hotel rooms, stolen nights, the careful logistics of two men whose careers depended on secrecy.

But the cottage was different. The cottage was two weeks. The cottage was waking up together and making breakfast and falling asleep on the couch watching bad movies and all the ordinary things that other couples got to do without thinking about it and that Shane and Ilya had to steal.

That was years ago. They were married now. They had a dog and a house and a Cup and each other and the cottage was just the cottage — their place, the quiet place, the place Shane had built without knowing who he was building it for.

"We're here," Shane said.

Ilya put his shoes on. Anya's carrier rattled with anxiety. The cottage sat at the end of the gravel road, tucked against the trees, the lake behind it flat and silver in the June light. The pier needed staining. The kayaks were still overturned from last fall. The front door stuck the way it always stuck.

Shane opened the door. The cottage smelled like pine and dust and the particular staleness of a place that had been waiting all winter for someone to come back.

Ilya walked past him, dropped his bag on the floor, opened every window in the kitchen, and stood at the back door looking at the lake.

"Two weeks," Ilya said.

"Two weeks."

"No phone."

"I'll have my phone."

"Your phone will be in a drawer."

"My phone will be on the counter."

"Your phone will be in a drawer, Shane. Two weeks. No spreadsheet. No Jinky. No Farrah. No podcast. Just us."

Shane opened his mouth to argue. Ilya turned and looked at him with the face that was not performing anything — the real face, the one that only appeared when they were alone, the one that said *I need this and I'm not going to explain why because you already know.*

Shane put his phone in the drawer.

The first three days were nothing.

That was the luxury. Nothing was what you couldn't buy with four Cups and a league-maximum contract and your face on the front page of every newspaper in Canada. Nothing was lying on the dock in the sun while Ilya swam in the lake and Anya barked at the water from the shore because she wanted to follow him in but was afraid of anything deeper than her own legs.

Nothing was cooking together in the kitchen — Shane following the recipe exactly, measuring flour with a leveled knife the way his mother had taught him, while Ilya improvised beside him with whatever was in the fridge and a confidence that bordered on

delusion. Sometimes what Ilya made was transcendent. Sometimes it was inedible. There was no middle ground. Shane had learned to eat before Ilya started cooking, just in case.

Nothing was Ilya talking to the spider plant on the windowsill in Russian, which he'd been doing since the day they'd moved in together and which Shane had never asked about because he understood, on some level, that the Russian was not for the plant.

The Russian was for the boy who'd grown up in Moscow and lost his mother at twelve and his father later and his country entirely when he'd chosen to love a man in public. The Russian was Ilya keeping something alive.

Nothing was *Île de l'amour* on the laptop on the porch, the Quebecois reality show Ilya had been addicted to for years despite speaking approximately nine words of French. Shane translated. Ilya provided commentary. This had been their arrangement since the first season they'd lived together, and it had never once occurred to either of them to change it.

"She is going to pick the wrong one," Ilya said.

"She always picks the wrong one."

"This is why I watch."

"You watch because you like drama."

"I like romance, Shane. You need to recognize it." He pulled Shane closer on the porch swing. Shane let himself be pulled. Ilya's arm around his shoulders, heavy, warm. The lake going orange in the sunset. The mosquitoes starting. Anya asleep between their feet.

"And I like you," Ilya said. Quiet. Not performing.

"You like me."

"Very much."

"That's good. We're married."

"I know. I was there. I wore a suit. Very handsome."

"You wore a suit for forty minutes and then took off the jacket and rolled up the sleeves."

"Very handsome for forty minutes."

Shane turned his head. Ilya was right there — close enough to count the places where his beard was coming in lighter, close enough to see the gold chain against his collarbone, the cross resting in the hollow of his throat where it always rested.

"Hey," Shane said.

"Hey."

Shane kissed him. Slow. Ilya's hand came to the back of his neck and stayed there and the laptop was still playing *Île de l'amour* and the woman on screen was absolutely going to pick the wrong one and the mosquitoes were getting worse and Shane didn't care about any of it.

"Inside," Ilya said, against his mouth.

"The episode isn't over."

"Shane."

"The episode—"

Ilya picked up the laptop, closed it, set it on the porch railing, and stood up in one motion. He held out his hand. His eyes were doing the thing they did when Ilya had decided something and the deciding was finished and the only remaining question was whether Shane was going to keep up.

Shane took his hand.

The bedroom at the cottage was Shane's favorite room. He'd spent more time on this room than any other with the architect — the king bed positioned so the first thing you saw in the morning was trees through the window, the blackout curtains for the nights his brain wouldn't quiet down, the quilt that Yuna had made folded at the foot. Everything in this room was by design. Everything in this room worked.

Ilya kissed him against the doorframe. Not slow this time. Ilya's mouth was warm and tasted like the wine they'd been drinking on the porch and his hands were on Shane's hips, thumbs pressing into the grooves above the bone, and Shane made a sound that he would have been embarrassed about if he'd had any capacity left for embarrassment, which he didn't, because Ilya was pulling his shirt over his head and then Ilya's shirt was off and they were chest to chest and Ilya's skin was hot from the sun and slightly rough with salt from the lake.

"Bed," Shane said.

"Bed," Ilya agreed, and they moved there without separating, Ilya walking Shane backward until his knees hit the mattress and he sat and Ilya followed him down.

Ilya's weight on top of him. Shane loved this — the heaviness, the certainty, the way Ilya's body covered his entirely because Ilya was six-three and two hundred and twenty pounds and Shane was five-ten and when Ilya was on top of him the world contracted to the space between them and nothing else existed. Shane's hands went to Ilya's back, the muscles shifting under his palms, the scar on his left shoulder blade from the surgery three years ago, the smooth dip of his spine.

Ilya kissed his neck. The spot below his ear that made Shane's hips move without permission. Then lower — his collarbone, the right one, the one Cliff Marlow had broken seven years ago and that Ilya

always kissed first, every time, as if he could undo the damage by being tender over the place where the damage had been.

"I want—" Shane started.

"Tell me."

"You. I always want you."

Ilya pulled back enough to look at him. His eyes were dark, the hazel gone almost brown in the low light. His hair was a mess from Shane's hands. The cross hung between them, swinging slightly.

"You have me," Ilya said. "You always have me."

He reached for the nightstand. They'd been doing this for fifteen years and the logistics had long since ceased to require discussion — the lube was where it always was, and Ilya's hands were steady the way they always were, and Shane closed his eyes and felt Ilya's fingers and then felt Ilya and then felt nothing except the specific, overwhelming fullness of being known completely by another person.

Ilya moved slowly at first. He always started slow — not because Shane needed it, they'd been past that for years — but because Ilya liked the beginning. He liked the moment before the moment. He liked watching Shane's face change.

Shane's face was changing. He could feel it — the way his mouth fell open, the way his brow drew together, the way the careful architecture of Shane Hollander dissolved into something raw and uncontrolled. He hated it, sometimes, how completely Ilya could take him apart. He loved it always.

"Look at me," Ilya said. Low, gravelly. In the voice that was not the public voice, not the charming voice, not the voice that did interviews and talked to reporters. The voice that was only for this room and this bed and this man.

Shane opened his eyes. Ilya was above him, forearms braced on either side of Shane's head, moving in the rhythm they'd built over a decade and a half — the rhythm that was theirs, that nobody else knew, that lived in the space between them like a secret they would never have to tell.

"Ilya—"

"I know."

Shane wrapped his legs around Ilya's waist and pulled him closer, deeper, and Ilya made a sound — half breath, half word, something Russian that Shane had never been able to translate because Ilya only said it during sex and refused to repeat it after — and the rhythm changed. Faster. Harder. Shane's hand found the headboard and held on and the bed frame hit the wall and somewhere in the cottage a door that was already open swung wider from the vibration and neither of them noticed.

Shane came first. He always came first when Ilya was inside him because his body was a traitor and because Ilya knew exactly what angle, exactly what depth, exactly what speed turned Shane Hollander from the most controlled man in professional hockey into someone who forgot his own name. He came with Ilya's hand on his cock and Ilya's mouth on his neck and Ilya's name in his throat and the sound of the lake through the open window and the quilt bunched underneath them.

Ilya followed. He pressed his face into Shane's shoulder and his hips stuttered and he said Shane's name — not Hollander, not the clipped public version, but *Shaaayne*, the way only Ilya said it, with the slight Russian softening of the vowel that made it sound like a word in another language — and then he was still.

They lay there. Breathing. The ceiling fan turning slow circles above them. The sweat cooling. Ilya's weight on Shane's chest, his face still in Shane's shoulder, the cross pressed between their bodies.

"Don't move," Shane said.

"I am not moving."

"Good."

"You are sticky."

"I don't care."

"I also do not care."

They didn't move. Outside, the lake was dark. Anya was probably asleep on the couch. Their phones were in the drawer in the kitchen. The world was very far away.

Shane ran his hand through Ilya's hair. The curls were damp at the base of his neck. Ilya hummed — the low sound, the content sound, the sound that meant Ilya was exactly where he wanted to be.

"Four Cups," Shane said. "For me."

"Two Cups," Ilya said. "I am catching up."

"You're not catching up."

"I have time."

Shane laughed. It was the laugh that only came out at the cottage — quiet, unguarded, with none of the careful control that existed in every other context of his life. Ilya lifted his head and looked at him with an expression that Shane had learned to identify over fifteen years as *I am memorizing this.*

"What?" Shane said.

"Nothing. Your laugh."

"What about it?"

"I like when you laugh here. You laugh different here."

"I laugh the same everywhere."

"You do not. Here you laugh like you forget someone might hear." Ilya pressed his mouth to Shane's sternum. "I love this laugh."

Shane put his hand on the back of Ilya's neck. Held him there.

Outside, something splashed in the lake. A loon called. The cottage was quiet and dark and theirs.

Top Shelf with Brewer and Fitz — Episode 449: "The Big Picture"

BREWER: Alright. We got a lot of mail after the last episode.

FITZ: A lot.

BREWER: And I want to address it, because some of you seem confused about what we said and what we didn't say. We spent forty-five minutes breaking down Game 7. We talked about the coaching adjustments. We talked about Matheson's series. We talked about Hollander's four Cups and where that puts him historically.

FITZ: And then we got three thousand emails asking why we didn't talk about the kiss.

BREWER: Right. So let's talk about the kiss. And I want to be clear — I'm not about to swallow my words. We've raised questions on this show about the direction of the league, and I still think those questions matter. I'm not suddenly waving a flag here.

FITZ: Nobody's asking you to wave a flag.

BREWER: Good. Because I'm not going to. But here's what I'll say. Two guys won the Stanley Cup and they were happy about it and they kissed each other on the ice because they're married and that's what married people do when something incredible happens. I

kissed my wife when our kid was born. I kissed my wife when we closed on the house. If I won the Stanley Cup, I'd kiss my wife. Hollander and Rozanov won the Stanley Cup and they kissed each other. That's — I mean, what is there to discuss?

FITZ: The hockey media seems to think there's a lot to discuss.

BREWER: The hockey media needs to get a grip. These two guys just played the best hockey of their lives. Hollander was the best player on the ice in Games 5, 6, and 7. Rozanov scored the Cup-clinching goal on a pass that shouldn't have been possible. And the story is that they kissed? Come on. I've got my opinions about the league and the culture and all of it, and I haven't changed them overnight, but I'm not going to pretend that what happened on the ice wasn't — look. It was incredible hockey. Period. They're a little kissy-kissy about it — that's their business. The hockey is my business. And the hockey was spectacular.

FITZ: "A little kissy-kissy." That's going to be a clip.

BREWER: Good. I stand by it. Now can we talk about the draft?

Day five. The dock.

Shane was lying on his back with a book he wasn't reading. Ilya was in the water. The afternoon was hot in the way that Ontario afternoons get in late June — heavy, still, the air thick enough to taste.

"I've been thinking about what you and Zane were talking about," Shane said.

Ilya surfaced. Water streaming down his face, his hair slicked back, the cross floating on the surface of the lake like a gold leaf. "About kids."

"About kids."

Ilya swam to the dock. Folded his arms on the edge, his chin on his forearms, looking up at Shane from the water. "What about kids?"

"I want them."

"I know. You started a file."

"I didn't start a—"

"Shane. I found the file. It's called FAMILY-PLANNING and it has tabs."

Shane's ears went warm. "It has two tabs."

"It has four tabs. I counted."

"The fourth tab is empty."

"The fourth tab is called SCHOOLS and it has a header row."

Shane put the book down. "I want them after the citizenship. When you're settled. When the eighteen months are done and the paperwork is filed and nobody can question whether you belong here."

Ilya was quiet for a moment. The water lapped against the dock. A dragonfly landed on Ilya's shoulder and stayed there, which happened to Ilya constantly — insects, birds, small children, strangers in grocery stores. Things landed on Ilya and stayed.

"I want to teach them Russian," Ilya said.

"Obviously."

"And I want them to know about my mother."

"Of course."

"And I want — this is going to sound—"

"Tell me."

"I want them to grow up here. At the cottage. In the summers. I want them to swim in this lake and be bored and complain about mosquitoes and know what it feels like to be somewhere where nobody is watching."

Shane's throat tightened. He reached down and put his hand on Ilya's wet head. The curls were dark and cold and Ilya leaned into his palm, instinctively, without thinking about it.

"We'll do all of it," Shane said.

"After the citizenship."

"After the citizenship."

The dragonfly left. Ilya hoisted himself onto the dock, water running off him, and lay down beside Shane. They stared at the sky through the trees. Somewhere in the house, Anya was probably destroying something. Their phones were still in the drawer.

"Names?" Shane said.

"Not yet. Too early."

"You already have a name."

"I do not."

"You have a name. You're thinking of one right now."

Ilya was silent.

"What is it?" Shane asked.

"Misha," Ilya said. Very quiet. "If it's a boy."

Shane turned his head. Ilya was staring at the sky.

"That's a good name," Shane said.

"It was my grandfather's name. My mother's father. He was a teacher. He taught piano."

"Misha," Shane said, trying it. "Misha Hollander-Rozanov."

"Misha Rozanov-Hollander."

"We'll discuss the order."

"I am captain. My name goes first."

"You're captain of the Centaurs. You're not captain of our hypothetical child's last name."

"I am captain of everything."

Shane laughed. The cottage laugh. Ilya turned his head and looked at him with the memorizing face again.

They lay on the dock until the sun moved behind the trees.

Two Hockey Chicks — Episode 36: "Off-Season Predictions and Also We're Obsessed with Luca Haas"

TRIX: Before we get into predictions, I want to address something. We've picked up a lot of new listeners in the last two weeks—

SAMMY: A LOT.

TRIX: —and some of them are coming from podcasts that will remain nameless but whose listeners seem confused about what they're going to find here. So let me be clear. This is a hockey podcast. We talk about hockey. If you're here for culture war content, you're in the wrong place.

SAMMY: If you're here because you think two women talking about hockey is a novelty, also wrong place. We've been watching this sport since we were old enough to sit in our dads' laps at the Forum. I've been a Voyageurs fan since 1998. Trix has been a Voyageurs fan since—

TRIX: Birth, basically. My mother went into labor during a Voyageurs-Boston game in the third period and my dad asked if they could wait until overtime.

SAMMY: They could not.

TRIX: They could not. I was born during the intermission.

SAMMY: Anyway. Luca Haas. Can we talk about Luca Haas? Because his neutral zone game in the Finals was—

TRIX: Incredible. And it's all Fred Johnson. That coaching tree is going to produce monsters.

SAMMY: Fred Johnson might be the most important assistant coach in the league right now and nobody's paying attention because he doesn't give interviews.

TRIX: He gave one interview. It was four sentences.

SAMMY: Four sentences! The man is an icon. Pour me more wine.

Day nine.

The cottage had settled into the rhythm that cottages settle into when you stay long enough — the mornings slow, the afternoons slower, the evenings measured by the angle of light on the lake. Shane ran in the mornings while Ilya slept. Ilya cooked breakfast while Shane showered.

They spent the middle of the day doing nothing, which was a skill Shane had never fully mastered and which Ilya had been born with. In the evenings they sat on the porch and watched the light change and talked about everything and nothing and the season they'd just played and the camp they were about to run and the future that was waiting for them eighteen months away.

Shane's body was recovering. The playoffs had taken more than he'd admitted — a hip that ached when he sat too long, a shoulder that clicked when he reached overhead, the general depletion of a man who had played ninety-eight regular season games and twenty-four playoff games in nine months. He noticed Ilya leaving ice packs in his chair without being asked. Advil on the counter beside the coffee mug. Ilya rubbing his hip in bed at night with the practiced pressure of a man who knew exactly where the pain lived and how to make it quiet.

Shane thought Ilya was handling the off-season the way he handled everything — easily, naturally, a man built for rest the same way he was built for hockey.

Shane let him. This was its own kind of intimacy — being tended to. Being known in the body as well as in the mind. Ilya's hands on his hip, the cross swinging between them, the lake quiet outside.

"You should see the physio when we get back," Ilya said.

"I'll see the physio."

"You said that after the Conference Finals."

"I'll see the physio, Ilya."

"If you do not see the physio, I will tell your mother."

"That's a war crime."

"I am Russian. We do not recognize war crimes."

"That's not funny."

"It is a little funny."

Shane didn't argue. It was a little funny.

Day twelve.

Shane was in the kitchen. It was late afternoon, the light going gold through the window, and he was doing something he almost never did at the cottage, which was checking his phone. He'd taken it out of the drawer because Melinda had texted about a document she needed signed — citizenship paperwork, routine, the kind of thing that felt enormous and mundane at the same time. He'd signed it electronically and was putting it back when he heard Ilya's phone buzzing from the same drawer.

Shane looked at the screen. The caller ID was in Cyrillic. He couldn't read it, but he recognized the country code.

Russia.

"Ilya," Shane called. "Your phone."

Ilya came in from the porch. He was barefoot, shirtless, a towel over his shoulder from the lake. He looked at the screen. His face didn't change.

That was the tell. Shane had known Ilya for fifteen years and he knew: when Ilya's face changed, it was performance. When it didn't change, the feeling had gone somewhere deeper.

Ilya picked up the phone.

"Da."

Shane watched. He couldn't understand the Russian — he'd been learning for years, could order food and say I love you and follow the

broad strokes of a conversation, but this was fast, native-speed, the kind of Russian that Ilya only spoke with family. Shane caught fragments. His own name. The word for brother. Something that might have been congratulations.

Ilya's hand went to the cross. His thumb pressed against the gold.

The call lasted four minutes. Ilya spoke less than the other person. When he hung up, he set the phone on the table very carefully, the way you set down something that might break.

"That was Alexei," Ilya said.

Alexei. Ilya's brother. The cop in Moscow. *We do not speak.* Except apparently, today, they did.

"What did he say?" Shane asked.

Ilya was looking at the phone on the table. His hand was still at the cross. His face was still not changing.

"He said he is very proud of his little brother."

Shane waited.

"He said *Dyadya Vova* has been strict lately. On..." Ilya paused. His jaw worked. "On my people. He said a Russian *fag* who wins the Cup and kisses his husband on television — this is not something they are excited about. This is giving the youth hope."

The words landed in the kitchen like something dropped from a height. Shane felt them in his body — not in his hands, which were steady, always steady, the circuit that disconnected his body from the event — but in his stomach. Cold. The kind of cold that started in the center and moved outward.

"He said I should keep a low profile," Ilya said. "Until things blow over."

"Keep a low profile."

"Yes."

"You just won the Stanley Cup."

"Yes."

"On national television. In front of — how many people watched Game 7?"

"I do not know."

"Twelve million. Twelve million people watched Game 7. And your brother is telling you to keep a low profile."

"Shane."

"What does 'things blow over' mean? What things? What specifically is happening?"

"He did not say specifically."

"He didn't say specifically because he's a cop and he knows exactly what's happening and he doesn't want to say it on the phone."

Ilya looked at him. The face was still the same — flat, controlled, giving nothing. But his thumb was pressing the cross hard enough that the skin around it had gone white.

"There is nothing I can do about Russia from this kitchen," Ilya said.

"There's nothing you can do about Russia from anywhere. That's the point. That's what makes it—"

"Shane."

"What."

"I need you to not do the thing you do."

"What thing."

"The thing where something happens and you open a laptop and build a spreadsheet and find the problem and fix the problem. This is not a spreadsheet problem. This is my brother calling me from Moscow to tell me that the president of Russia noticed that I exist. There is no tab for this."

Shane's hands were on the counter. Flat. Still. His fingers wanted to move — wanted to find the laptop, wanted to open the file, wanted to start a new tab and label it RUSSIA and begin sorting. That was what Shane did. That was how Shane survived. You name the threat. You track it. You build the model. You find the solution.

But Ilya was right. There was no model for this.

"What do you want to do?" Shane asked.

Ilya was quiet for a long time. The kitchen was gold with late light. The lake was visible through the back window, flat and silver. Anya was asleep on the couch in the next room, and the phone was on the table between them, and the cottage that Shane had built for his own calm — and, without knowing it, for Ilya — had just let the world in through a phone call.

"I want to finish our two weeks," Ilya said. "I want to go to camp. I want to coach kids who are afraid of the ice and teach them not to be afraid. And then I want to call Melinda and I want to call your father and I want to figure out what is happening and what we do about it."

"Okay."

"And I want you to hold me right now and not say anything for a while."

Shane crossed the kitchen. He put his arms around Ilya and Ilya's forehead dropped to his shoulder and they stood there in the gold light, in the cottage, in the quiet.

Shane didn't say anything.

He held on.

That night, Shane couldn't sleep.

Ilya was out — the heavy sleep that came after he'd gone quiet for a long time, his body choosing rest before his mind was ready to give it. Shane lay beside him in the dark and stared at the ceiling and did the thing Ilya had asked him not to do, which was build the model.

Russia. Article 6.21 — the "gay propaganda" law. He'd read it. He'd read it when it was first passed and he'd read it again when he and Ilya went public and he'd read it a third time when Melinda had mentioned it in their very first meeting about citizenship. The law was broad and vague and designed to be broad and vague because broad and vague laws are the ones that can be applied to anyone at any time for any reason.

Ilya was a Russian citizen. A publicly bisexual Russian citizen who had just kissed his husband on international television after winning the Stanley Cup. The footage had played on every network in every country, including Russia. Including the networks that the government controlled.

A Russian fag who wins the Cup and kisses his husband on television — this is giving the youth hope.

Giving the youth hope. That was the crime. Not the kiss. Not the marriage. The hope. The possibility that a Russian boy could see Ilya Rozanov and think: *maybe I can have that too.*

Shane turned his head. Ilya was asleep, the cross glinting in the dark, his breathing steady. This man. This man who had survived a dead mother and a cruel father and a country that wanted him to be invisible. This man who had learned to perform ease the way other people learn languages — fluently, constantly, so well that most people never heard the accent.

This man who had chosen Shane over everything and kept choosing him every day and who was now, in his sleep, in his safe place, in his cottage, being threatened by a government that couldn't touch him physically but could touch every person he'd left behind.

Alexei. A cop in Moscow. With a family.

Shane got up. He went to the kitchen. He opened the drawer. He took out his phone.

He didn't open a spreadsheet. He opened his contacts. He found Melinda Sotto's number. He typed a message and then deleted it. He typed another message and deleted that too.

He put the phone back in the drawer.

He went back to bed. He put his hand on Ilya's back, between the shoulder blades, where the warmth was.

Three days left at the cottage. Then camp. Then Melinda. Then his dad. Then whatever came next.

Eighteen months. A number. A door. And now, behind the door, a country that had decided Ilya Rozanov was giving its children too much hope.

Shane closed his eyes. His hands were steady.

They were always steady.

Ilya

Chapter 7: Ilya

The Russian internet has its own version of the story, and the Stanley Cup isn't in it. Camp opens. The anxiety doesn't close. A Wednesday grocery run ends with sirens, and the Hollander family stops waiting on the sidelines.

The Russian internet found him before he found it.

Shane was the one who suggested looking. They were in the kitchen, three days after the cottage, coffee going cold on the counter because neither of them had touched it since Alexei's call. Shane had his laptop open — not the spreadsheet, not the file. YouTube. He'd typed Ilya's name in Cyrillic, which meant he'd been practicing in secret, because Shane's Russian typing was slow and careful and he always got the soft sign wrong.

"Show me," Shane said.

Ilya took the laptop. He scrolled. And the sound that came out of him was not a word — it was the sound of a door opening onto a room he'd known was there but had chosen not to enter.

The kiss was everywhere.

Not the Cup. Not the trophy. Not the pass through two defensemen or the celebration or the seventeen thousand people standing. The kiss. His hand on Shane's face. Shane's fingers in his jersey. Two men on the ice, and behind them, out of focus, the Stanley Cup that apparently mattered less than the fact that the men holding it were married to each other.

Channel One Russia: a three-minute segment. Ilya didn't need to play it to know what it said — the thumbnail was enough. His face, mid-kiss, with a chyron in red: **RUSSIAN NATIONAL ILYA ROZANOV MARRIED TO A MAN.** Not "hockey player." Not "two-time Cup champion." *Russian national*. As if the citizenship were the crime and the kiss were the evidence.

He played it anyway. The anchor — a woman in her fifties with the specific blondness of state television — spoke in the measured, contemptuous tone that Russian news reserved for stories about the West's moral failures. Ilya caught fragments. *Provocative display. Public defiance. Married a Canadian man and chose to taunt the Russian press with this act on international television.*

"Taunt," Ilya said. "I was not taunting. I was kissing my husband."

Shane was watching his face. Not the screen. "What are they saying?"

"That I am taunting them."

"By existing."

"By existing on camera."

He scrolled further. *NTV, REN TV, Russia-24* — each one had found a different angle on the same photograph. One had cropped it so that only Ilya was visible, Shane's hand ghosted out of frame, as if the story were about a Russian man who had done something shameful rather than two men who had won something extraordinary. Another had placed the kiss photograph beside a stock image of the Kremlin, which was so heavy-handed it would have been funny if Ilya's hands weren't shaking.

He opened *Lenta.ru*. The headline was quieter, which made it worse: **ROZANOV'S PRIVATE LIFE DRAWS ATTENTION FROM THE KREMLIN.** Below it, a timeline of Ilya's career presented with the clinical detachment of a medical chart — draft year, teams, statistics

— and then, at the bottom, like a diagnosis: *publicly entered into same-sex marriage, 2022. Kiss broadcast on international television, June 2024.*

Komsomolskaya Pravda had run an op-ed. Ilya skimmed it. The writer's thesis, buried under three paragraphs of false concern for Ilya's "well-being," was that Russia had lost one of its sons to the moral sickness of the West, and that the Cup — mentioned once, in passing, as if it were a minor credential — was less significant than the damage Ilya was doing to Russian youth by showing them that a man could love another man and be celebrated for it.

Giving the youth hope. There it was again. Alexei's phrase, now echoed in state-adjacent media.

"No wonder *Dyadya Vova* noticed," Ilya said. He said it in Russian first, then again in English, because Shane's face had done the thing where it went very still.

"Who?"

"Uncle Vova. It is what people call him. The president." Ilya closed the laptop. His fingers were still on the keys. "It is not a name of respect. It is a name of fear that pretends to be respect. Like calling the wolf *dear uncle* so he does not eat you."

Shane took the laptop. Gently, the way Shane took things when he could see that Ilya's hands needed to be empty.

"It's different here," Shane said.

It was different here. The North American coverage was in a different language, literally and otherwise. Ilya had seen it — the front pages, the sports networks, the podcast clips. *First married couple to win the Cup together. Historic. Beautiful. The kiss seen round the hockey world.* People were happy. People were celebrating. There were think pieces about what it meant for the sport and memes about

Ilya's face during the kiss and a Twitter thread with four million impressions that was just the photograph set to different love songs.

But the comment sections. The comment sections were always there, underneath the celebration, like mold under fresh paint. *Shoving it down our throats. What happened to just playing hockey. They won the Cup — do they have to rub it in everyone's face?* And worse, below that, the things Ilya had stopped reading years ago but that Shane tracked in his spreadsheet because Shane believed naming a threat was the first step to controlling it.

"There are always assholes," Ilya said. "The assholes are not the problem."

"What's the problem?"

"The problem is that the assholes in Russia have a government behind them."

Camp opened on a Tuesday.

Ilya had been talking to Galina twice a week since the cottage. Dr.Galina Molchalina, the only therapist in Ottawa who spoke Russian, which Ilya had decided was either lucky or a very specific kind of divine joke. She had an office on Rideau Street above a café, in a building with good light and a waiting room that smelled like the espresso machine downstairs.

The office itself was nicer than Ilya had expected the first time — a cheerful blue sofa with yellow and white throw pillows, abstract art on the walls, magazines on a squat coffee table that he'd pretended to read during his first session while trying not to bolt.

Galina was a small woman, probably forty-three, with dark blond hair she wore in a neat ponytail. Ilya had wondered, the first time he'd shaken her hand, when she'd left Russia and why. He'd never asked. She'd never offered.

This was one of the things he liked about her — she did not trade in backstory unless it was useful, and she never once told Ilya that his feelings were valid, which he appreciated, because he didn't need someone to validate his feelings. He needed someone who understood what it felt like to hear Russian on the news and have your stomach drop.

"The anxiety is not about one thing," she'd said in their last session. They always spoke Russian. "You are holding multiple threats at once. That is exhausting for the nervous system."

"I am Russian and bisexual and famous. I have always been holding multiple threats."

"Yes. And now one of them has a government seal on it."

Ilya pressed his thumb against the cross and looked at the window, where Rideau Street was doing what Rideau Street always did — being noisy and alive and completely indifferent to his problems.

Camp was the same and not the same. The kids showed up — fifty-eight of them, ages eight to fourteen, in borrowed gear and new skates. The coaches showed up. Ryan and Fabian. Hayden with the twins, who were twelve now and complained about everything with the cheerful authority of children who had grown up around hockey players. Craig Stephenson with Tyler and Casey. Zane with Milo on his hip. Troy with Harris, Wyatt and his wife Lisa. Leah Campbell and her husband Max Riley. Everyone came back, ready to help.

Ilya ran drills. He showed a nine-year-old how to stop without falling. He raced a twelve-year-old to the blue line and let her win, and she knew he'd let her, and she glared at him with a fury that was specific to children who wanted to earn it.

"Again," she said.

"Again," Ilya agreed. This time he didn't let her win. She almost beat him anyway, and her face when she crossed the line — two seconds

behind, furious, already planning — was the reason he coached.

But underneath, the anxiety hummed. Low, constant. Ilya smiled and coached and signed jerseys and picked up a kid who'd fallen and carried her to the bench while she cried into his shoulder. He did all of it with the feeling that something was watching from a distance. Patient. Waiting for him to be still long enough.

At night, they worried.

Not always out loud. Sometimes it was Shane on his laptop at midnight, reading something he wouldn't show Ilya. Sometimes it was Ilya awake with the cross between his fingers, running scenarios the way he ran defensive schemes. If Russia issues a formal complaint. If Alexei's family is pressured. If the story doesn't die.

"Come to bed," one of them would say, and the other would close the laptop or set down the phone and get into bed and they would hold each other and not talk about the thing they were both thinking about.

The grocery store was Ilya's idea.

A Wednesday. Camp had ended early because of rain. Ilya wanted to make dinner — something complicated, something that took hours, something that left no room for the hum.

"Come with me," he said to Shane.

Shane was on the couch, Anya on his lap. He looked at his phone. Looked at Ilya. Put the phone down.

"What are we making?"

"Pelmeni. The real kind."

"You told me the real kind takes four hours."

"We have four hours."

They drove to the Farm Boy on Metcalfe. Ilya liked the meat counter and the woman who worked it, Barb, who had been cutting his pork shoulder for three years and called him *hon* and never once mentioned hockey.

Shane pushed the cart. Ilya selected things — flour, eggs, the specific ground pork that had to be this fat content and not that, onions, dill. Shane added items from a list on his phone that Ilya hadn't asked for but that Shane had made anyway.

They were in the store for forty minutes. They talked about nothing. Shane held up two brands of sour cream and Ilya picked the one on the left without looking and Shane put it in the cart and said "You always pick the left one" and Ilya said "The left one is always correct."

Ordinary. That was the point.

They loaded the bags into the back of the Land Rover. The parking lot was half empty — midafternoon, a gray Ottawa sky that couldn't commit to rain. Ilya put the last bag in and was reaching up to close the hatch when the first shot hit the car.

The sound split the air in two.

Ilya didn't think. His hand found Shane — the back of his jacket, the collar, whatever his fingers reached first — and he yanked him down behind the Land Rover. Shane's shoulder hit the rear wheel. Ilya was on top of him, pressing him flat against the asphalt, one hand on the back of Shane's head and his body covering Shane's because that was the only equation that made sense — himself between Shane and whatever was out there.

The second shot hit the Land Rover's rear quarter panel. Metal screaming. The sound ricocheted off the concrete and the storefronts and came back wrong, doubled.

Then the third.

The third didn't hit the car. It came past Ilya's left side — close enough that the sound arrived inside his body before it arrived in his ears, a high thin zing that cracked against the pavement three feet behind them. Concrete dust kicked up. Something stung his neck — debris from the impact.

But the bullet had touched him on the way past.

He didn't feel it as pain. He felt it as absence — a tug at his left sleeve, a whisper of pressure across his upper arm, and then nothing. He wouldn't understand what had happened until later, standing in the parking lot with the police, when he looked down and saw the leather jacket. The left sleeve was torn open from the elbow to three inches above the wrist — a clean furrow ripped through the leather, the lining exposed, the material peeled back like something had dragged a blade along it at speed.

The bullet had grazed the jacket without touching the arm underneath. Millimeters. The space between the leather and his skin had been the space between a graze and a wound.

The motorcycle.

He heard it between the second and third shots but only understood it after — the high revving, aggressive, close, and then pulling away fast. He lifted his head enough to see a shape disappearing around the corner of Bank Street. Dark jacket. Helmet. Gone.

Then nothing.

The parking lot was ringing. The silence after gunfire is not silence — it's the sound of everything that was there before the shots trying to come back and finding that it can't, not yet. A car alarm had started somewhere. The woman with the stroller was screaming — not words, just sound, the stroller abandoned, her child in her arms, running toward the store. A man in a delivery truck near the entrance

had his phone out, his hand shaking so badly he dropped it and picked it up and dropped it again.

"Shane." Ilya's voice didn't sound like his voice. "Shane, talk to me."

Shane was against the pavement. His cheek was scraped where it had hit the asphalt. His eyes were open. But the eyes were wrong.

Not closed, not unconscious — wrong. Shane was looking at Ilya but Ilya wasn't sure Shane was seeing him. The pupils were wide. The face was blank in a way that went past the circuit, past the controlled flatness that Shane used to manage crisis. This was further. This was a man whose nervous system had pulled the emergency brake and was sitting in the wreckage of a stopped mind, all the machinery still running but the driver's seat empty.

"Shane." Ilya put his hand on Shane's face. The scrape was beading blood. "Shane, look at me. We are okay. It is over. Look at me."

Shane blinked. Slow. Then again, faster. His eyes refocused — a visible thing, like watching someone adjust a lens. His hand came up and grabbed Ilya's wrist. Tight. The grip of a man pulling himself back to the surface.

"Ilya." Shane's voice was thin. Far away. Then again, closer: "Ilya."

"I am here."

"Are you hit?"

"No."

"Are you—" Shane's eyes went to Ilya's left arm. The torn jacket. The furrow in the leather. His face changed — not the circuit, not the blank. Something worse. The color left it from the cheekbones down, a tide going out.

"I am not hit," Ilya said. "The jacket. Only the jacket."

Shane sat up. His back against the tire. He was still holding Ilya's wrist. His other hand went to the torn sleeve, his fingers touching the exposed lining, the edge where the leather had been ripped open. He ran his thumb along the furrow. His mouth opened. Closed.

"Only the jacket," Ilya said again.

Shane nodded. His jaw was working. Something behind his eyes was rearranging itself — the shock receding, the operator coming back online, systems rebooting one by one. Ilya watched it happen. He'd seen Shane take hits on the ice and get up. He'd seen Shane lose games and absorb it. He had never seen Shane go somewhere else entirely and have to find his way back.

"The car," Shane said. His voice had found its flatness. Operational. "We need to look at the car."

"The car can wait."

"I need to look at the car, Ilya."

They stood up. Ilya's knees were bleeding through his jeans. They walked around to the back of the Land Rover and there it was. Two holes — one in the rear hatch, punched through the metal near the handle, and one in the rear quarter panel, lower, edges curled inward.

And on the pavement behind where Ilya had been standing, a divot in the concrete where the third round had buried itself after grazing his jacket. Three feet from where his body had been. The distance between the divot and where he'd stood was nothing.

Shane looked at the holes. Looked at the divot. Looked at Ilya's sleeve. Ilya watched him build the geometry in his head — the trajectory, the angle, the speed of the motorcycle, the path of the third bullet from the barrel to his jacket to the pavement. Shane was doing math. The math was the only thing keeping him upright.

Ilya pressed his thumb into the cross so hard the metal cut his skin.

Sirens. Someone had called it in — the truck driver, or the woman, or someone inside the store. The sirens were coming from two directions. Police and ambulance. The full machinery of a city responding to three gunshots in a grocery store parking lot at two-thirty on a Wednesday afternoon.

The first police cruiser arrived. Then the second. Then the ambulance.

The parking lot became a scene. Yellow tape. Officers talking into radios. A detective — not the first responders, someone pulled from something else — introduced himself as Paulsen. He had a badge on a chain and a face that suggested long hours and not enough of them. He looked at the bullet holes. He looked at the divot. He crouched beside Ilya's jacket sleeve, which Ilya had taken off and was holding because a paramedic had asked to look at his arm and the arm was fine — unmarked, unbroken, the skin uncut, protected by high-quality Italian leather that Ilya had bought at a shop on Sparks Street three years ago because Shane said it looked good on him.

"May I?" Paulsen asked, gesturing to the jacket.

Ilya handed it over. Paulsen held the sleeve up. Looked through the tear at the gray sky. Set the jacket down carefully, the way you handle evidence.

"You were standing here?" he asked. "Closing the hatch?"

"Yes."

Paulsen looked at the divot. Looked at where Ilya was pointing. His face did not change, but he wrote something on his pad and underlined it twice.

Witnesses were already talking. The parking lot had been half empty but half empty still meant people, and people who have just heard gunfire do not stay quiet.

The woman with the stroller was sitting on the curb near the store entrance, her toddler in her arms, talking to a uniformed officer. She was speaking fast and her hands were shaking and she kept pointing — at the corner of Bank Street where the motorcycle had disappeared, at the Land Rover, at the spot where Ilya and Shane had gone down. Ilya could hear fragments. *I heard the first one and I didn't know what it was. Then the second and I grabbed Mackenzie and I ran. I saw the motorcycle — dark, I think black, the rider had a helmet, dark visor, I couldn't see the face. He was going fast. Northbound on Bank.*

The truck driver was calmer. He was leaning against his vehicle, talking to another officer, a coffee cup in his hand that he'd been holding since before the shots and hadn't put down. *I was looking at my phone. I heard three pops. I looked up and saw the motorcycle pulling away from the lot — not the street, he was IN the lot, near the exit, like he'd come up behind the row of cars. I didn't see a gun. I saw the bike leave. Sport bike, not a Harley, the kind with the full fairing. Dark. Fast.*

An older man — sixties, gray windbreaker, a Farm Boy bag in his hand — had been walking to his car two rows over. He was sitting in his car with the door open, talking to a third officer. Ilya heard: *The tall one — the hockey player, I recognized him — he grabbed the other one and pulled him down so fast I thought they'd fallen. Then I heard the third shot and I got down too. I was behind my car. I stayed there until the sirens.*

The hockey player. The tall one. Even here — even crouched behind a car with bullets going through metal — identifiable.

Paulsen took their formal statements in the back of an ambulance with the doors open. The motorcycle. The dark jacket. The helmet. Three shots. The direction.

"Security cameras?" Shane asked.

His voice was steady now. The operator was fully back. But Ilya could see the cost — the tension in Shane's shoulders, the way his jaw was set, the careful precision of each word like he was placing them on a shelf and if he moved too fast they'd fall.

"We're pulling everything," Paulsen said. "The store, the bank across the street, the traffic camera at the intersection. If he came up Bank, we'll have plates."

"If," Shane said.

"If," Paulsen agreed.

Top Shelf with Brewer and Fitz — Episode 452: "Breaking News"

BREWER: We are — I want to be clear — we are departing from the planned show tonight because something happened today that needs to be addressed immediately. If you came here for draft analysis, we'll get to it. But not tonight.

FITZ: At approximately 2:30 this afternoon, Ottawa Centaurs captain Ilya Rozanov and center Shane Hollander were the targets of a shooting in a grocery store parking lot in downtown Ottawa. Three shots were fired from a motorcycle. Two struck their vehicle. One — and I need to say this carefully because I'm still processing it — one grazed Rozanov's jacket. His jacket. Not his body. But his jacket.

BREWER: Both players are physically unharmed. Ottawa police have confirmed the investigation is active. No arrest has been made.

FITZ: In fourteen years of hockey coverage, have you ever had to report that a player was shot at? Not in a metaphor. Not in a rivalry. Someone pointed a gun at two hockey players in a parking lot and pulled the trigger three times.

BREWER: No.

FITZ: No. Because this doesn't happen in hockey. This doesn't happen in Canada. Except now it has. And I think we need to sit with that before we say anything else.

[Silence. Seven seconds.]

BREWER: I'm going to say something and I'm going to own it. We've spent this season talking about the culture around this team. The noise. The backlash. The podcast ecosystem. And I think we've been too careful about connecting dots. I think we treated #TakeBackHockey like a social media phenomenon and not like what it actually is, which is a radicalization pipeline. And now someone fired a gun.

FITZ: We don't know the connection yet.

BREWER: We don't. And I'm not saying we do. But I'm saying that when you spend a year telling people that two men are ruining their sport, when you build an entire media infrastructure around the idea that these players don't belong, when you make it acceptable to say "take back hockey" as if someone stole it — you are creating conditions. You are building the room. And if someone walks into that room and does something violent, you don't get to say you didn't build it.

FITZ: I agree. And I think we need to hear from the league. Commissioner Villeneuve-Trudeau needs to make a statement. The Players' Association needs to make a statement. This isn't a hockey story anymore. This is a public safety story.

BREWER: Rozanov and Hollander just won the Stanley Cup three weeks ago. They were loading groceries. Groceries. And someone tried to kill them.

FITZ: We'll be back tomorrow with more. Be safe out there. Hold the people you love.

Real Hockey Podcast — Episode 22: "The Shooting"

HOST 2: So before we start — look, we have to address this.

HOST 1: We condemn what happened. Obviously. Violence is never the answer. Shooting at someone is — that's criminal. That's insane. We've never advocated for anything like that and we never will.

HOST 3: Nobody on this show has ever—

HOST 1: Nobody. We talk about hockey. We have opinions about the direction of the sport. That's it. Anyone trying to connect what happened today to podcasts or commentary or the Take Back Hockey movement — that's irresponsible. That's the media doing what the media does, which is find a narrative and force everything into it.

HOST 2: We're a hockey podcast. We didn't shoot anyone.

HOST 1: And I'll say this — our prayers are with both players. We're glad they're safe. Now can we please stop acting like every person who has questions about the direction of the league is a potential shooter?

HOST 3: I just want to say — I think we should be careful right now. About tone. About everything.

HOST 1: We're always careful.

HOST 3: I think we should be more careful.

HOST 1: Noted. Next topic.

Two Hockey Chicks — Episode 38: "No."

SAMMY: No.

TRIX: That's it. That's the episode title. No.

SAMMY: I was going to do a cold open. I had a whole thing planned about off-season trades. I can't do it. I've been crying for two hours. Trix has been crying for two hours. We're sitting in my kitchen and we're drinking wine at four in the afternoon and someone shot at Shane and Ilya in a parking lot.

TRIX: Three times.

SAMMY: Three times. From a motorcycle. While they were loading groceries. While they were doing the most normal thing in the world. And a bullet went through Ilya's jacket sleeve. His sleeve. I keep thinking about that. What is a jacket sleeve? A quarter inch of material between a bullet and a person's arm? An arm that scores goals and holds his husband and picks up kids at camp?

TRIX: Sammy.

SAMMY: I'm fine. I'm not fine. I'm going to be honest about not being fine because I think that's important right now. Two Hockey Chicks has always been about hockey. We break down plays and debate line combinations and argue about coaching decisions. That's what we do. But today I need to say something that isn't about hockey.

This is what happens.

This is what happens when you spend a year building a media ecosystem that says these men don't belong. When you give people permission to be angry about love. When you create a phrase — "take back hockey" — that sounds like a slogan but functions like a target on two specific human beings. This is what the end of that road looks like. A parking lot. A motorcycle. Three bullets.

TRIX: The Real Hockey guys put out a statement. "We condemn violence. We've never advocated for this."

SAMMY: Of course they condemn it. They always condemn the thing they helped build. You radicalize for months, and when someone acts, you condemn the action while defending the conditions that created it. It's the oldest trick in the book and I am too tired and too angry to pretend it's anything other than what it is.

TRIX: I want to read something. Ottawa police confirmed that witnesses saw the motorcycle enter the parking lot from the south end and fire three times at the vehicle belonging to Rozanov and Hollander. One witness — a man in his sixties — told police he recognized Rozanov and saw him pull Hollander to the ground after the first shot. "He covered him," the witness said. "The tall one covered the other one with his body."

SAMMY: He covered him with his body.

TRIX: Yeah.

[Silence. Five seconds.]

SAMMY: We'll be back when we can talk about hockey again. Right now I don't have hockey in me. I have rage and wine and a very deep need for someone to be held accountable.

TRIX: If you're a queer hockey fan listening to this, I want you to hear me. You are not ruining anything. You belong in this sport. You belong in every arena and every parking lot and every grocery store. Don't let them make you small.

SAMMY: Two Hockey Chicks. We'll see you next week.

Shane called Melinda from the ambulance.

Ilya called David.

He didn't plan to. His thumb found the contact before his brain made the decision, and then David's voice was there — "Ilya?" — and

something in Ilya's chest cracked at the sound of it. David Hollander's voice. The steadiest sound he knew.

"David. Something happened."

He told him. Short sentences. The grocery store. Three shots. The motorcycle. Nobody hit. The police.

David was quiet for four seconds. Four seconds of David Hollander silence, which was not empty — it was a man absorbing information and deciding what needed to happen next.

"Are you safe right now?"

"We are at the scene. Police are here. Ambulance."

"Is Shane hurt?"

"Scraped cheek. He went into shock for a moment. He's come back."

"Are *you* hurt?"

Ilya looked at the torn jacket on the ambulance gurney. "A bullet went through my jacket. The sleeve. It did not touch me."

David's breath. A single exhale, controlled, and in it Ilya heard the entire weight of what David was not saying.

"I'm coming. Yuna and I are coming right now. Stay where you are." A pause. "Ilya, I'm going to call Rupert."

"Who is Rupert?"

"Rupert Fawcett. We've been friends since university. He was Special Forces. Then CSIS. He runs a private security firm now. He's the best at what he does and I'm calling him."

"David—"

"This isn't a discussion. Someone shot at my boys. I'm calling Rupert."

My boys.

"Okay," Ilya said.

"Fifteen minutes."

David hung up. Ilya stared at the phone.

Shane was still on with Melinda. Ilya could hear the rhythm of it — Shane delivering information, Melinda asking questions.

"Melinda's bringing her brother," Shane said when he hung up. "Martin Sotto. Human rights attorney."

"David is bringing someone called Rupert."

"Rupert?"

"Former CSIS. Former Special Forces. Security firm."

Shane blinked. "My dad knows a CSIS guy?"

"Your father knows everything and everyone and has never once mentioned it. This is why your father is a terrifying man."

"My father is not—"

"Shane. Your father played hockey at McGill and has worked at the Treasury Board for thirty years and his first phone call after we are shot at is to a man named Rupert who was in Special Forces and CSIS. Your father is extremely terrifying and I love him very much."

Shane almost smiled. The scrape on his cheek made it crooked.

Yuna and David arrived at the scene in twelve minutes.

Yuna was out of the car before David had turned off the engine. She was wearing jeans and a Team Canada fleece — whatever had been closest to the door — and her face was doing something Ilya had never seen it do, which was lose its composure entirely.

She grabbed Shane first. Both hands on his face, turning it, looking at the scrape, her fingers on his jaw.

"I'm fine, Mom."

"You are not fine. You were shot at."

She turned to Ilya. Her hands went to his shoulders, his arms. She saw the bandage on his neck — the paramedic had covered the concrete cut. Then she saw the jacket. It was on the gurney, the torn sleeve facing up, the furrow in the leather visible from three feet away.

Yuna picked up the jacket. She held the sleeve. She put her finger through the tear — the hole where the bullet had entered the leather and exited the other side, ripping a channel through the material without touching the arm inside. She looked at the tear. She looked at Ilya.

Her mouth opened. Nothing came out.

"It is only the jacket," Ilya said.

"Only the jacket." She said it back like a translation of something she couldn't understand. Her thumb was inside the tear, touching the lining. Her hand was shaking.

David was talking to Paulsen. Ilya could see them — David with his reading glasses on, his jacket still on from work, listening to the detective with the focused attention of a man who'd spent thirty years in government and knew how to extract information from officials without them realizing they were being debriefed.

"Come home with us," Yuna said. It was not a request. "Both of you. Tonight."

"Yuna—"

"Someone on a motorcycle shot at you three times in a parking lot. You are coming home with us and you are not arguing."

Ilya looked at Shane. Shane gave the smallest nod.

"Okay," Ilya said.

"Good." Yuna put the jacket down. She straightened his collar. A reflex. The mother underneath everything. "Good."

Yuna and David's house. Twenty minutes from the crime scene and a lifetime from the parking lot. The two-story in Westboro, gray with white trim, the garden David maintained with quiet precision. Ilya had been here hundreds of times. He'd eaten every holiday in this kitchen. He'd fallen asleep on this couch. This house was safe.

It did not feel safe tonight.

They sat in the kitchen. Yuna poured wine — the good red, the one she kept by the bread box, the one she opened for celebrations and crises and nothing in between. She poured four glasses. David was in the hallway, on the phone with Rupert, his voice low enough that Ilya heard cadence but not words.

Shane had his laptop open. He'd started a new tab before they left the parking lot. Ilya didn't ask what it was called.

"I need to say something," Yuna said. She was holding her wine with both hands. "And I need you both to listen before you tell me I'm overreacting."

"We are listening," Ilya said.

"Alexander Litvinenko."

The name landed on the table.

"Mom," Shane said.

"Former FSB officer. Defected to Britain. Criticized the Kremlin publicly. They poisoned him with polonium in his tea. In London. In a sushi restaurant. He took twenty-three days to die and the British government identified two Russian agents and nothing happened."

"Mom—"

"Sergei Skripal. Former Russian intelligence. Double agent for the British. Retired. Living in Salisbury — a quiet English town, the kind of place where nothing happens. Russia sent two GRU agents with a Novichok nerve agent. They poisoned him and his daughter on a park bench. A British woman died because she found the discarded perfume bottle they'd used as a delivery device. A random woman. Dead. Because Russia decided to kill someone in a country that wasn't theirs."

"Yuna," Ilya said. Gently.

"These are not conspiracy theories. These are documented, investigated, confirmed facts. The Russian government kills people who embarrass them. On foreign soil. In allied countries. And they do it because they can." Her voice had risen. Not shouting — Yuna didn't shout. But the volume was higher than Ilya had ever heard, and her hands on the glass were white at the knuckles.

"Ilya is not a defector," Shane said. His voice was careful. "He's not an intelligence officer—"

"He's a Russian national who kissed his husband on international television and made the front page of every state-run outlet in Russia. He is *visible*. Litvinenko was visible. Skripal was visible. Visibility is what gets you killed."

"Yuna." Ilya reached across the table and put his hand on hers. The knuckles were hard under his palm. "Look at me."

She looked at him. Her eyes were bright. Not crying. Furious. The animal fury of a woman whose son and son-in-law had been shot at in a parking lot after buying groceries.

"You are right," Ilya said. "About Litvinenko. About Skripal. You are right that these things happened and that Russia does terrible things to people who embarrass them. You are right to be afraid."

Her mouth opened. He kept going.

"But I am not Litvinenko. I am not Skripal. I am not a spy. I am a hockey player with a very good immigration lawyer and a husband who has a spreadsheet for everything and a mother-in-law who is already three moves ahead of everyone in this room." He squeezed her hand. "And I am in Canada. And I have you. And I have David, who is in the hallway right now calling a man from CSIS because your quiet, birdhouse-building husband apparently has a Rolodex that would frighten the prime minister."

Yuna's mouth twitched.

"Have some wine," Ilya said. He picked up her glass and put it in her hand. "It is good wine. You always buy good wine. Drink it and be angry and then we will figure this out."

She took the glass. She drank. She set it down. She looked at him with the expression that was too big for strategy — the mother.

"If anything happens to you," she said. "Either of you."

"Nothing is going to happen to us."

"You can't promise that."

"I am Russian. We promise impossible things. It is cultural."

The laugh came out of her before she could stop it — short, wet, more gasp than laugh. She wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand. "You are impossible."

"Also cultural."

Shane was watching from across the table. His laptop was open but his hands were not on the keys. He was looking at Ilya with the face that cracked open — the architecture falling away.

David came back. He sat down. He picked up his wine.

"Rupert can be here tomorrow morning," David said. "He's driving down from Petawawa tonight. He wants to see the car. He wants to meet with the detective. And he wants to do a full assessment — the house, the camp, your routines."

"Dad," Shane said. "We can't just—"

"You can and you will." David's voice was the same as always. But underneath it was something Ilya hadn't heard before. Steel. "Rupert's firm handles protective details for diplomats, executives, people who've received credible threats. You have received a credible threat. A bullet went through Ilya's jacket. This is not theoretical."

He took a sip of wine. Set the glass down.

"I've been waiting to make this call," David said. "I hoped I wouldn't have to."

"How long have you been waiting?" Shane asked.

David looked at him. "Since the day you came out."

The kitchen was quiet. The wine was breathing. Somewhere in the living room, Anya had found David's slippers.

"Okay," Ilya said. "Rupert tomorrow."

"And Melinda's brother," Shane said. "Martin Sotto. Human rights attorney. Nine a.m."

"Martin first," David said. "Then Rupert. We build the legal case and the security at the same time." He looked at Yuna. "You should be at the meeting."

"Try to keep me out of it," Yuna said. She had finished her wine. Her face had settled — not calm, but organized. The fury sorted and filed and now fuel instead of fire.

Martin Sotto arrived at Melinda's office at ten to nine.

He was shorter than Shane — five-seven, maybe five-eight — with black hair going gray at the temples and a face that read as kind before it read as anything else. Brown skin, Filipino features, the particular posture of a man who had been in the military and whose body still remembered it even in civilian clothes. His glasses were Clark Kent glasses — thick black frames, slightly too large for his face, the kind that made a serious man look approachable. Thirty-eight years old, though Ilya wouldn't have guessed it — the gray and the glasses and the way he carried himself made the number irrelevant.

His briefcase had seen better decades. He wore a rumpled blazer over a t-shirt that said OSGOODE LAW.

"Martin Sotto," he said, shaking Ilya's hand. Firm grip. The eyes behind the frames were sharper than the rest of him — alert, assessing, the eyes of someone trained to enter rooms and know the situation before anyone spoke.

"Mel's told me about your case. I'm sorry we're meeting under these circumstances."

He shook Shane's hand. Then David's — the shake firmer, the recognition of one man who understood institutions greeting another.

Then Yuna's, and Martin held her hand a beat longer, the way people do when they can see the person in front of them is running on will alone.

"Martin was Canadian Armed Forces before law school," Melinda said. She was at her desk, files open, coffee poured. Craig's photo on the bookshelf. "Six years. Then Osgoode. Then the Refugee Law Office and now his own practice. International human rights. He's argued before the Federal Court, the UN Human Rights Committee, and the Inter-American Commission."

"I also do parking tickets," Martin said, pulling out a legal pad and uncapping his pen with his teeth. "Less interesting."

Ilya liked him. In the body, before the brain. Something about the way Martin sat down and looked at them — all five, because Yuna and David were in the chairs against the wall — with the expression of a man who had heard bad stories before and was ready to hear another.

"Tell me everything," Martin said. "Start with the brother's call."

Ilya told him. Alexei's call. *Dyadya Vova*.The Russian coverage. The *Komsomolskaya Pravda* op-ed. Then the shooting. Three shots. The motorcycle. The torn jacket. Shane filled in what Ilya skipped — the spreadsheet, the data, the #TakeBackHockey architecture.

Martin listened. He wrote. He didn't interrupt. When they finished, he set the pen down.

"Here's where we are. Canadian permanent resident, Russian national. Evidence of coordinated domestic harassment. A shooting — three rounds, a moving vehicle, a near-miss that put a hole through his jacket. And a foreign government using state media to target him publicly."

He looked at Ilya. "Has anyone from the Russian government contacted you directly?"

"No."

"Your brother — is he in a position where the government could pressure him?"

Ilya's jaw tightened. "He is a police officer in Moscow."

"So yes."

"Yes."

Martin wrote something and underlined it. "The citizenship application is Mel's lane and she's the best. But what happened yesterday — that's a different legal problem. If a foreign government is escalating rhetoric against an individual, and that individual is experiencing targeted violence in Canada, there's a framework. It's not fast. It's not comfortable. But it exists."

"What framework?" Shane asked.

"At the basic level, we document everything and build a case for expedited processing on humanitarian grounds. More aggressively, we explore a formal protection claim." Martin paused. "Asylum. Refugee status. Something that puts the Canadian government on record acknowledging the threat."

Asylum.

Ilya had heard it in the abstract. Applied to other people, other countries. Not to him. He was a Stanley Cup champion. He made fifteen million dollars a year. People like him didn't need asylum.

Except the jacket in the evidence locker of the Ottawa PD had a bullet furrow through the sleeve that said otherwise.

"I'm not saying we file tomorrow," Martin said. "I'm saying we keep the option open. In the meantime — document, escalate security, make sure every authority knows."

Melinda was looking at Ilya. "The timeline hasn't changed. Eighteen months. Six months in. The file is strong. But Martin's right — yesterday changes the picture. It gives us tools we didn't have before." She paused. "Not good tools. But tools."

"I have a question," Yuna said. She hadn't spoken since the meeting started. "If Russia is behind this — I'm not saying they are, but if — what protection does the Canadian government offer? Specifically."

Martin took off the glasses. Cleaned them on his t-shirt. Put them back on. Buying two seconds.

"The Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. The Charter. International obligations under the 1951 Convention. If we demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution based on sexual orientation and nationality, there are strong avenues."

"And if we can't?"

"We can. The media coverage alone is evidence of state-directed hostility. The shooting establishes the threat environment. But I'll be honest — this will be public. The moment we file anything related to asylum, it's a story. A big one. Every newsroom in the world."

"Good," Yuna said.

Everyone looked at her.

"Let them. Let every newsroom see the bullet holes and the Russian coverage and the government that thinks my son-in-law is giving children too much hope."

David put his hand on her arm. Not to stop her. To steady.

"I am not overreacting," she said.

"No," David said. "You're not."

Ilya looked at the window. Laurier Avenue. The same street, the same buses, the same Canada he had chosen.

"Okay," he said. "Document everything. Keep the option. I will tell you everything about Alexei and about Russia and about things I have not told anyone."

Shane's hand found his under the table.

"They matter," Martin said. "Everything matters now."

Farrah called that afternoon.

"Every network in North America wants you," she said. "Kimmel wants you next week. Seth Meyers has a slot Thursday after next. Both confirmed holds."

Ilya was on the couch at Yuna and David's. Anya on his chest. Shane was in the kitchen with Yuna, who was cooking because Yuna cooked when she needed control.

"We were shot at yesterday, Farrah."

"I know. And that's why you need to be visible. Hiding makes you a target. Being everywhere makes you untouchable."

Ilya stared at the ceiling.

"Shane," he called.

Shane appeared. "Farrah wants us on Kimmel and Seth Meyers."

Ten seconds. Shane calculating.

"Yes," Shane said. "Farrah's right. If we go dark, the narrative is that we're hiding."

"I am afraid," Ilya said.

"I know. We show up anyway."

"Shane says yes," Ilya said into the phone. "We'll go."

"Confirmed," Farrah said. "I told the show yes while you were talking."

"You are very annoying."

"Prep packets tomorrow."

She hung up. Shane sat on the edge of the couch. His hand went to Ilya's hair, fingers moving through the curls. The motion of a man confirming the body under his hand was whole.

From the kitchen, Yuna's voice: "What did Farrah want?"

"Talk shows," Shane called. "Kimmel. Seth Meyers."

A pause. Then: "Good. Wear the blue suit. Both of you."

Ilya closed his eyes. Shane's hand in his hair. Anya warm on his chest. Yuna choosing their wardrobe. David in the hallway, on the phone again, building walls between his family and whatever was coming.

"We're going to be okay," Ilya said.

He didn't know if it was true. But Shane was here and Anya was breathing and from the kitchen came the sound of Yuna's wooden spoon and David's low voice and this was his family — not the one he was born into but the one that had chosen him.

"We're going to be okay," he said again.

Shane kissed his forehead. Stayed there.

In the kitchen, Yuna turned the stove up. David ended his call. Anya destroyed the left slipper.

Outside, the Ottawa evening held onto its light.

Shane

Chapter 8: Shane

The world has opinions. The league, the police, and the Premier make statements. New faces arrive — the kind who sweep rooms before you enter them. Then a phone rings from the wrong country, and the word "asylum" stops being theoretical. But Farrah has a plan, and it involves two blue suits, a dog story, and twenty million viewers.

The statements came in waves.

Commissioner Villeneuve-Trudeau was first. Her office released it at 8 a.m. the morning after the shooting — a written statement, no press conference, which Shane understood immediately as a choice. A press conference would have invited questions. Questions would have invited speculation. A written statement said: *This is what the league believes. The conversation is not open.*

Shane read it at the kitchen table at his parents' house with his coffee going cold. Ilya was still asleep upstairs. Anya was under the table, pressed against Shane's foot.

The league is aware of the incident involving Ottawa Centaurs captain Ilya Rozanov and center Shane Hollander. We are in contact with Ottawa Police Services and will cooperate fully with the ongoing investigation. The safety of our players, both on and off the ice, is a non-negotiable priority. Any act of violence targeting players in this league — for any reason — is an attack on the sport and on the values this organization exists to uphold. We will have more to say in the coming days. For now, our focus is on the well-being of Ilya and Shane and their families.

First names, at the end. Not Rozanov and Hollander. Shane noticed. The commissioner knew them. She'd handed Ilya the Cup three weeks ago. She'd shaken Shane's hand on the ice and said, in the low voice that cut through noise the way her voice always did, *You've earned this. Both of you.*

First names. Deliberate.

Ottawa Police Chief Amit Gupta spoke at a press conference at ten. Shane watched it on his phone, standing in the hallway where the signal was better. Gupta was measured — the kind of public official who understood that the purpose of a press conference after a shooting was to communicate competence without promising outcomes.

"Ottawa Police Services is treating this as a targeted attack," Gupta said. "We have recovered physical evidence from the scene, including projectiles and vehicle damage consistent with firearm discharge. Multiple witnesses have provided statements. Security camera footage from the surrounding area is being reviewed. We are working closely with federal partners. I want to assure the public that this investigation is active, it is resourced, and it is a priority."

A reporter asked if there was a suspect. Gupta said the investigation was ongoing. A reporter asked if the shooting was connected to threats against Rozanov and Hollander. Gupta said they were exploring all avenues. A reporter asked if the Russian government was involved.

Gupta paused. One second. Two.

"We are exploring all avenues," he said again. Same words. Same tone. The pause was the answer.

Premier Doug Jennings of Ontario released a statement at noon. It was longer than it needed to be, which Shane expected from a politician, and it used the phrase "Ontario values" three times, which Shane also expected. But buried in the middle was a sentence that

mattered: *The Province of Ontario stands ready to provide any support requested by law enforcement and by the families affected. An attack on two Ontarians in an Ontario community is an attack on all of us.*

Two Ontarians. Ilya was not yet Canadian, but the Premier of Ontario had just called him an Ontarian on the record. Shane filed that. It would go in Melinda's folder.

The media was everywhere.

Not the hockey media — the media. CNN. CBC. BBC. *The Globe and Mail* ran the story above the fold with the photograph of the bullet holes in the Land Rover and a headline that read **STANLEY CUP CHAMPIONS TARGETED IN OTTAWA SHOOTING**. *The New York Times* put it on the front page of the sports section with a sidebar about anti-LGBTQ+ violence in professional athletics. Fox News ran a segment that managed to discuss the shooting for four minutes without once mentioning that Rozanov and Hollander were married, which was its own kind of statement.

Rose texted from Sydney at four in the morning her time, which meant she'd been up or she'd set an alarm. *Just saw the news. Are you okay? Are you OKAY? I'm stuck on set for three more weeks or I'd fly home. Call me when you can. I love you both.* Shane stared at the message. Rose Landry, on the other side of the world, in the middle of a shoot, setting an alarm to check on them. He typed back: *We're okay. Dad is getting us bodyguards. Long story. Love you too.* Then, after a pause: *Kill it in Australia*. Rose sent back a heart and a kangaroo emoji.

Jinky sent Shane a spreadsheet. Jinky sent everyone spreadsheets now — it was how Jinky showed love, the way Ilya's was cooking and Shane's was organizing and Farrah's was strategy. The spreadsheet tracked every media mention in the first twenty-four hours. Four hundred and twelve stories. Thirty-seven countries. The shooting was trending in nine languages.

"This is good," Farrah said on the call. She and Jinky were at the office. Shane could hear Jinky's keyboard in the background, the staccato of someone settling a personal score with every key. "I know it doesn't feel good. But every camera pointed at you right now is a camera that makes the next attempt harder."

"If there is a next attempt," Shane said.

Farrah was quiet for a moment. "We plan as if there will be."

Jinky's voice from off-screen: "I've got forty-three new accounts activated. The queens are mobilized. If anyone tries to spin this as anything other than what it is, we will ratio them into the sun."

"All sass but zero ass," Farrah murmured.

"But I have the internet's ass," Jinky said. "And the internet's ass is *huuuuuge*."

Rupert Fawcett arrived at ten the next morning.

Shane had expected — he didn't know. Someone like his father, maybe. Someone in a suit with the careful posture of government work. Rupert was not that. Rupert was six-one, broad, with a shaved head and a beard that was mostly gray and hands that looked like they'd been used for things that didn't involve desks. He wore a dark jacket over a polo shirt and he entered the house the way Shane imagined Special Forces entered buildings — eyes moving first, body following, every surface assessed before he sat down.

"David," Rupert said, and shook his father's hand with both of his, the way men do when the friendship is old enough that the greeting has its own choreography.

"Rupert." His father's voice was warm. Warmer than Shane had heard it since the shooting. "Thank you for coming."

"I brought two of my people. They're outside." He looked at Shane. Then at Ilya, who was leaning against the kitchen counter with coffee, the torn leather jacket still draped over a chair because nobody had moved it and Ilya refused to throw it away. "Jensen Ritter and Marie Chalamet. They'll be your detail."

"Our detail," Shane repeated.

"Your protective detail. Wherever you go, they go. That's the arrangement until the threat picture changes."

Jensen and Marie came in ten minutes later, after Rupert had finished explaining the assessment he wanted to do — their house, Shane's parents' house, the camp facility, daily routes, public appearances.

Jensen Ritter was tall — six-three, same height as Ilya — with sandy hair cut short and a lean build that suggested endurance over strength. Dark suit, good fit, unremarkable. Shane noticed the small earpiece only because he was looking for it. Jensen's face was calm. Not friendly, not unfriendly. Working.

Marie Chalamet was five-six, dark hair pulled back, olive skin, the same dark suit. She moved differently from Jensen — quieter, closer to the walls, her eyes going to windows and doors before they went to people. She shook Shane's hand with a grip that was firm and brief and then stepped back to the entrance of the hallway and didn't sit down.

She wasn't here to socialize. She was already on.

"Jensen will be primary on Ilya," Rupert said. "Marie on Shane. Both former JTF2. They've done protective details for diplomats, federal officials, and high-profile individuals under credible threat. They know Ottawa. They know how to be visible when that's useful and invisible when it's not."

Ilya was looking at Jensen. Shane could see him assessing — not the way he assessed players on the ice. Something more basic. Whether this person could keep Shane alive.

"You were JTF2," Ilya said.

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Eight years."

"And before that?"

"Infantry. Two tours overseas."

Ilya nodded. Whatever he'd been looking for, he'd found it. "Okay."

Marie hadn't spoken yet. Shane looked at her. She was watching the room — not the people, the room. Windows, sight lines, the distance from the kitchen to the front door.

"The house on your street is better than this one," Marie said. Her first words. Low, even. "Setback from the road, fenced yard, fewer approach vectors. I'd recommend you move back as soon as Rupert's assessment is done."

"How long for the assessment?" Shane asked.

"Tonight," Rupert said. "New locks, camera placement, panic button locations. Jensen and Marie will rotate shifts — one on, one off, twelve hours. When you travel, both travel."

Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya looked at Shane. The conversation that didn't require words. *This is real now.*

Ilya gave the smallest nod.

"Do the assessment," Shane said.

The call came two days later.

Shane was in the living room at their house — they'd moved back the previous evening. Jensen was outside. Marie was somewhere in the house, doing whatever Marie did during her shift, which appeared to involve being aware of every sound within a two-hundred-foot radius while looking like she was reading a magazine.

Ilya was in the kitchen, on the phone with Galina. Shane caught the rhythm of it — fast, native Russian, the kind Ilya only spoke when he wasn't translating himself for anyone else's benefit. Shane had picked up enough over the years to recognize tone but not meaning, which was probably the point. Ilya's therapy was the one room Shane didn't enter.

Then the Russian stopped.

Not ended — stopped. Mid-sentence. Shane looked up from his laptop. Ilya was standing at the counter with the phone pressed to his ear and his face had gone flat. The tell.

"Ilya?"

Ilya held up a hand. Listening. His jaw was tight. His other hand was at the cross, thumb pressing gold.

Then he took the phone away from his ear. Looked at the screen. Set it on the counter carefully, the way you set down something unstable.

"That was not Galina," Ilya said.

"What?"

"Galina and I were speaking. The call dropped. A new call came in — a Russian number. I answered because I thought it was a connection error." He paused. "It was not."

Shane closed the laptop. "What did they say?"

"A man. He said he was calling on behalf of the Russian Ministry of Justice. He said that I am a Russian citizen who has violated Article 6.21 and that the ministry is preparing an extradition request. He said I will be returned to Russia and sentenced to twenty years in a labor colony." Ilya's voice was steady. His hand on the cross was not. "Then he hung up."

The kitchen was very quiet. The refrigerator hummed. Outside, a lawn mower. Jensen's shadow passing the window.

"Did you recognize the voice?" Shane asked.

"No."

"Could it have been—"

"I don't know. Government, or crank who found a Russian number. I don't know."

Shane's hands were on the table. Flat. Still. The impulse was there — laptop, new tab, new row. He kept his hands still.

"I'm calling Melinda," Shane said.

"Yes."

He called. Second ring.

"Melinda, Ilya just received a phone call. Someone claiming to represent the Russian Ministry of Justice. They said they're preparing an extradition request. They referenced Article 6.21. Twenty years in a labor colony."

Two seconds of silence. Then the voice Shane had come to rely on — calm, precise, already working.

"Is he safe?"

"He's standing in front of me. New bodyguard's on perimeter."

"Good. First: Russia cannot extradite a permanent resident from Canada without a treaty and a Federal Court process. There is no active extradition treaty between Canada and Russia for this type of matter. Article 6.21 is a domestic Russian law with no standing in Canadian courts. Second: this call may be genuine state intimidation or a private individual. Either way, it's evidence. I need the number, the time, and everything Ilya can recall. I'll coordinate with Martin."

"Okay."

"Shane. This doesn't change the legal picture in the way they want it to. It changes it in the way *we* want it to. Every threat strengthens the file."

"I'll tell him."

"I'll call back within the hour."

She hung up. Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya was still at the counter. His hand had not left the cross.

"Melinda says Russia can't extradite you from Canada," Shane said. "No treaty. Article 6.21 has no standing here. The call is evidence. It helps the file."

Ilya nodded. He didn't say anything for a while. Then: "Twenty years. They said twenty years in a labor colony."

"It's a threat. Designed to scare you."

"It is working."

Shane stood up. Crossed the kitchen and put his arms around Ilya. Even after all these years, the size difference registered — Shane's face against Ilya's collarbone, Ilya's chin resting on the top of Shane's head. Ilya's forehead dropped to Shane's shoulder and his hands came to Shane's back and held on.

They stood there. The refrigerator hummed.

"Twenty years," Ilya said into Shane's neck. "In Russia, twenty years means you do not come back."

Shane held on tighter. "I won't let them take you, babe. Never."

Hayden showed up that evening without calling first.

This was Hayden. Hayden Pike did not call ahead, did not text, did not observe the social customs that governed how people visited friends in crisis. Hayden showed up. He showed up with a case of beer and a bag from the shawarma place on Elgin and he walked past Jensen at the front of the house with the confidence of a man who had been walking into Shane's spaces uninvited for ten years and was not about to let a six-three former Special Forces operative change the habit.

Jensen had Hayden identified and cleared before he reached the door. Shane didn't ask how. Jensen appeared in the hallway and said, "Hayden Pike. He's on the list," and went back outside.

"You have a list," Hayden said, setting the beer on the counter. "And a guy."

"We have two guys. And a list."

"Good. You should have had a list a year ago." He pulled Shane into a hug — hard, brief, the Pike hug. Then he found Ilya on the couch, where Ilya was watching *Île de l'amour* with the sound off, and hugged him too. Ilya accepted it with the tolerance of a man who had known Hayden Pike for years and understood that resisting his affection was like resisting weather.

"Jackie sends her love," Hayden said. "The kids made you a card. Amber drew a picture of Anya on it. She's getting better — you can actually tell it's a dog now."

"Amber is very talented," Ilya said.

"Amber is seven. But sure." He sat down. Opened a beer. He didn't ask about the shooting. He didn't ask about the Russian call that Shane freaked out about. He just sat — big, present, filling a room that needed filling.

Shane sat across from him. Ilya stayed on the couch. Anya migrated from Ilya's lap to Hayden's feet.

"I need to ask you something," Shane said.

"Ask."

"Camp. Ilya and I need to step back for a bit. Security, legal, media. We can't run camp and manage all this."

Hayden took a pull from the beer. "You want me to take over."

"You and Zane and Troy. Craig Stephenson's already full-time. Ryan and Fabian can handle their groups. But someone needs to be the face."

"The parents trust you."

"The parents don't need their kids around two men with bodyguards and a bullet hole in their car."

Hayden set the beer down. The serious face — rare enough to always register. Cleft chin, green eyes going steady, the loudness pulling back.

"I've got it," Hayden said. "Zane and Troy too — I'll call them tonight. You deal with whatever you need to. Camp'll be there when you get back."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. Just come back." He looked at Ilya. "Both of you."

"We will," Ilya said from the couch. He said it without looking away from the silent television, but Shane could hear the weight.

Hayden stayed for two hours. He ate shawarma and drank beer and talked about nothing — the twins' soccer tournament, Arthur's sudden obsession with rocks he insisted on calling minerals, Amber's school play.

As he was leaving, he stopped at the door.

"Pike," Shane said.

"Hollander."

"Tell the kids I said hi."

"Tell Ilya to stop teaching Jade Russian swear words."

"He's not going to stop."

"I know." The Pike grin — the one that could light a room or start a fight. "Take care of him. Take care of yourself."

He left. Jensen watched him go.

Shane locked the door. The new deadbolt. The sound it made was heavier than the old one.

They flew to Los Angeles on a Thursday.

First class, because Farrah had insisted and because the airline had offered the upgrade when they learned who was on the manifest and Ilya had said yes before Shane could think about optics. "You just won the Stanley Cup," Farrah had said. "Nobody expects you to fly coach."

Jensen and Marie were in business class, one row back. Close enough that Shane could see Jensen's shoulder in the aisle. Far

enough that the illusion of privacy held, if you didn't look too hard.

Ilya had the window seat. He was wearing the blue suit — the one Shane's mother had chosen, the one Farrah had approved. On Ilya, a suit was less clothing than event. Six-three and broad through the shoulders, tapering to a narrow waist, the light brown curls he'd let grow out since the playoffs falling across his forehead. The stubble along his jaw and the strong line of his cleft chin. Hazel eyes that shifted green or gold depending on the light, dark thick eyebrows, and the lopsided, lazy smile that he gave the flight attendant when she brought his drink — the smile that made people forget what they'd been doing.

Shane had watched it happen for fifteen years. Flight attendants losing their sentences. Hotel staff blinking. Strangers on the street walking into things. The smile was a weapon Ilya deployed without appearing to know he was armed, which was its own kind of performance.

Shane was in the aisle seat in his own blue suit — darker, fitted, the one he'd worn to the ESPYs two years ago. He knew what he looked like. He'd been told often enough that the information had been filed and archived in the part of his brain where facts lived that didn't require active attention. Jet black hair. Very dark eyes — almost black in certain light, from his mother. Flawless tan skin and the dark freckles across his nose and cheekbones that had been his most recognizable feature since he was eighteen. Cosmo had named him the hottest man in the NHL two years running, which Ilya brought up whenever Shane needed to be embarrassed and which Shane had never once acknowledged publicly.

He was five-ten — shorter than most people expected, shorter than Ilya by four inches, compact and precise in the way that the best centers were built. People looked at Ilya first. They looked at Shane longer.

Ilya was fiddling with his tie. Not because it needed fiddling — Ilya had been wearing suits to games and events since he was eighteen,

could tie a Windsor in the dark, and his knots were always precise. But he was pulling at it, loosening it, a restless energy that had nothing to do with the tie and everything to do with the five hours between here and the studio.

Shane reached over and straightened it. The tie was perfect. It had been perfect before Shane touched it. This was not about the tie. This was about Shane needing something to fix, some small controllable thing in a world that had become uncontrollable, and the tie was the closest object to his hands.

Ilya let him. He always let him. The stillness of a man who understood that Shane's hands needed to be busy and that a tie was a small price to pay for Shane's nervous system.

"Thank you," Ilya said.

"It was fine."

"I know."

"I just—"

"I know."

Marie, from the row behind, said nothing. Shane had the impression she was smiling, but when he glanced back her face was neutral.

The flight was five hours. Shane spent three on his laptop — Farrah's prep packet, forty-two pages. Ilya spent five hours watching a movie, sleeping for forty minutes, eating the in-flight meal with more enthusiasm than it deserved, and reading the prep packet for the last thirty minutes.

"Did you read the whole thing?" Shane asked.

"I read the important parts."

"The whole thing is important."

"The important parts are: be charming, talk about hockey, mention the dog, do not discuss the shooting, do not discuss Russia, let Shane handle the political questions, smile."

"That's — actually a reasonable summary."

"I am very good at summaries."

The car from LAX to the studio took forty-five minutes.

Jensen was in the front seat. Marie was in the follow car. They pulled up to the studio and Shane saw them before the car stopped.

Fans. Maybe sixty, maybe more, pressed against barricades outside the entrance. Not the usual talk-show crowd. Hockey fans. Shane could see Centaurs jerseys — Hollander 24, Rozanov 81 — and hand-painted signs and rainbow flags. Someone had a poster that said WE LOVE YOU in block letters with a drawing of the Cup between the words. Someone else had THE TALL ONE COVERED THE OTHER ONE, the witness quote that had become, according to Jinky, one of the most shared phrases on the internet in seventy-two hours.

A woman in the front row was holding a sign that said HOCKEY IS FOR EVERYONE and she was already crying. Standing there, tears on her face, before they'd even gotten out of the car.

"Look," Ilya said.

Shane looked.

A group near the back — teenagers, fifteen or sixteen, in matching rainbow beanies. One had a Rozanov 81 jersey with a pride flag sewn onto the sleeve. Another held a poster: YOU GIVE US HOPE.

*Giving the youth hope.*The crime. Here it was, written on poster board by a sixteen-year-old in Los Angeles.

Ilya's hand found Shane's on the seat. Squeezed.

"We should sign," Ilya said.

"We'll be late."

"We should sign, Shane."

Jensen turned from the front seat. "Five minutes at the barricade. Marie will position at your six."

Five minutes became ten. Ilya worked the line the way Ilya worked every line — autographs, selfies, his hand on a shoulder, the lopsided smile deployed at full wattage. Shane followed, quieter, signing jerseys and nodding with the half-smile that Farrah called his "aw-shucks press conference face" and that Ilya called "the face that makes Canada think you are a humble boy from Ottawa and not a man with four Stanley Cups and a plan for everything."

The staring was different here. Los Angeles was a city that manufactured beauty — engineered it, exported it, put it on billboards seventy feet high. And the people behind the barricades were staring anyway. Shane and Ilya didn't look like the billboards. They looked like what happened when a sport spent fifteen years carving two bodies into instruments and then put them in good suits. Harder than actors. Less careful. The afternoon sun caught Ilya's curls and the dark freckles across Shane's cheekbones and neither of them was performing anything, which was maybe why it worked.

The woman with the WE LOVE YOU sign couldn't speak. She held the sign and cried. Ilya hugged her. He towered over her — she disappeared into his chest, and the crowd made a sound that wasn't a cheer. Something softer.

Shane touched the woman's arm. "Thank you for being here."

The teenagers in the rainbow beanies were shaking. The one with the pride flag jersey said, "Mr. Rozanov, you saved my life," the

words rushing out, and Ilya put his hand on the kid's shoulder and said, very quietly, "Then it was worth it."

Jensen touched Shane's elbow. Time.

They went inside. The hallway to the green room was long and bright, lined with photographs of previous guests.

A production assistant — a woman in her twenties with a headset and a clipboard — was waiting to escort them, and she looked up as they came around the corner and her face did the thing that faces did when Shane and Ilya entered rooms together. A brief pause. A recalibration. She'd worked in a studio in Los Angeles — she was around famous, good-looking people every day — and she still paused. She recovered in a second, professional, smiling, but it had been there.

"Mr. Hollander, Mr. Rozanov, right this way." Steady voice. Red ears.

The green room had a couch and a mirror and a spread of food that neither of them would eat. Jensen stationed himself outside. Marie was somewhere in the building.

Shane checked his hair. Checked Ilya. Ilya was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, watching Shane fidget.

"Hey," Ilya said. He crossed the room and caught Shane's hands. Held them. "We have been on international television since we were seventeen."

"That was hockey."

"This is also hockey. We are hockey players who are also people. We sit in chairs, we answer questions, we are ourselves. It will be fine."

"You'll be fine. You're always fine on camera."

"And you will be fine because you will do the thing you do — be very quiet and very precise and very Canadian. Everyone will love you because everyone always loves you, Shane. You are impossible not to love. I have tried. It did not work."

Shane's mouth twitched. Ilya pressed — leaning in, kissing the corner of Shane's mouth, quick. The cologne. The warmth of his hand on Shane's jaw.

"We've got this," Ilya said.

"We've got this," Shane said.

A knock. Two minutes.

The set was bright and the audience was loud and Jimmy Kimmel was shorter than Shane expected, which meant Kimmel was about Shane's height, which meant Shane noticed.

He shook both their hands backstage. He looked up at Ilya — the four-inch difference — and then at Shane and said, "Okay, so one of you is enormous and one of you makes me feel like I'm a normal height for the first time in my life. I already like you better," pointing at Shane.

"Everyone likes Shane better," Ilya said. "This is my burden."

"I'm going to be honest," Kimmel said. "I know nothing about hockey. I know the puck is flat and the fights are real. That's it."

"I will explain everything," Ilya said. "Shane will correct me."

"That's exactly what my wife and I do." Kimmel grinned. "Let's make some television."

The walk-on was a blur. The band. The audience standing. The sound. Ilya waved. Shane raised a hand. They sat down.

Kimmel looked at both of them across the desk. Then at the audience. Then back.

"Okay, I have to address this immediately," Kimmel said. "Look at these two. I've had movie stars on this show — people whose literal job is being attractive — and I'm sitting across from two hockey players and I'm re-evaluating my life choices. I mean — " he gestured at Ilya's shoulders, then at Shane's face. "Is this normal for hockey?"

The audience laughed. Shane felt heat at the back of his neck.

"In hockey, we are considered average," Ilya said, and his face was so straight that it took the audience a second to catch the joke, and then the laugh doubled.

"If that's average, I've been watching the wrong sport." Kimmel shook his head. "Alright. Help me understand what happened three weeks ago, because I've watched this clip thirty times."

He showed the Game 7 goal. The impossible pass, the redirect, bar down. The audience — civilians, non-hockey people — reacted with the surprised delight of people discovering that a sport they'd dismissed was extraordinary.

"He—" pointing at Shane — "passes the puck through two guys?"

"Two defensemen," Ilya said.

"Through two defensemen. And the puck goes to you. One touch. It's in the net."

"Yes."

"How?"

Ilya looked at Shane. Shane looked at Ilya. Fifteen years in a glance.

"He knows where I am," Ilya said. "He always knows where I am."

The audience made a sound. Not a cheer. The sound that means something landed in the center of a chest.

"That's the most romantic thing anyone has said on this show, and I've had actual couples trying." Kimmel was smiling. "So you've been playing together — how long?"

"Against each other since seventeen," Ilya said. "With each other two seasons. Married two years."

"Married two years and you still like each other?"

"Most days," Shane said.

The audience laughed. Kimmel pointed at Shane. "See, that. He's been quiet the whole time and then he comes in with that. That's a hockey thing, right? Wait for the opening?"

"Yes," Ilya said. "Shane is always waiting for the opening. On the ice and in conversation. I am always talking. Shane is always waiting. This is our marriage."

More laughter. Shane felt his shoulders loosen. They'd been doing this for years — press conferences, events, league functions. Ilya filled the room and gave Shane space. Ilya was the surface. Shane was the depth.

"Now I have to ask about the dog," Kimmel said.

"Anya," Ilya said, and his voice changed. Softer. "Fifteen pounds. Terrier-shepherd mix. Anxiety disorder and enormous brown eyes. She destroys my father-in-law's slippers. Only the left one. Always the left."

"Why the left?"

"Nobody knows. It is her preference. David buys new slippers. Anya destroys the left one. Three years this has been going on."

"You let this happen?"

"I buy David new slippers every Christmas. I also give Anya the old ones as toys. Shane's mother says I am enabling the situation."

"You are enabling the situation," Shane said.

"I am managing complex household dynamic."

Kimmel was really laughing — not the talk-show laugh. The audience was with them. Shane could feel it — the room leaning in, the alchemy of two people being genuinely themselves on camera.

They talked about the Cup, the cottage, the camp. They did not talk about the shooting. They did not talk about Russia. The line between a news story and a talk show was the line between victim and person. Tonight they were people.

"Alright," Kimmel said near the end. "I need to be honest. Before today, I did not care about hockey. I thought it was just angry Canadians hitting each other with sticks."

"That is also what hockey is," Ilya said.

"But watching you two, watching that clip — I might have been wrong. I might need to watch a game."

"Come to Ottawa," Shane said. "We'll get you seats."

"I might take you up on that." Kimmel looked at the audience. "Can we get these two back?"

The audience cheered. Shane felt Ilya's hand on his knee under the desk.

"You have to come back," Kimmel said. "I need you to explain offsides. I've been reading about it for two hours and I don't understand it."

"Nobody understands offsides," Ilya said. "This is the secret of hockey."

The band played them out. The audience was on its feet. Shane stood and his legs felt strange — the post-adrenaline release. Ilya put his hand on the small of Shane's back, guiding him off, and the touch was warm and real.

Backstage, Kimmel found them.

"That was great. You're the real deal. Whatever's going on with the other stuff — a lot of people are pulling for you."

"Thank you," Shane said.

"Bring the kids to our game. I'm serious," Ilya added.

"My kids can barely walk," Kimmel said.

"I will teach them to skate."

"They'll love that. Be safe. Both of you."

Be safe. Everyone said that now.

Jensen was at the car. Marie in the follow vehicle. The fans outside had thinned but a few remained. Someone shouted "We love you!" and Ilya raised his hand and the sound faded into the Los Angeles night.

New York was two days later.

LAX to JFK. First class. Jensen and Marie in business. Shane had started noticing the small things — how Jensen positioned himself between Ilya and the aisle, how Marie tracked every person who passed their row, how both relaxed fractionally when the cabin door sealed.

They were recognized at JFK. A man in a Yankees cap at baggage claim: "Rozanov. Hollander. My daughter plays hockey in Long Island. You guys are her heroes." Ilya signed his phone case.

At the hotel, the woman at the desk was wearing a Centaurs pin — in New York — and her hands shook as she processed their keys. She looked up at Ilya, then at Shane, and the look lingered on Shane in the way it tended to — people expected Ilya's face, which was everywhere, and were unprepared for Shane's, which was quieter and landed differently. The dark eyes, the freckles, the stillness. Ilya dazzled. Shane stuck.

In the elevator, a businessman stared at them for eight floors and then said, very quietly, as the doors opened, "Game 7 was the greatest thing I've ever seen," and walked out without waiting for a response.

Everywhere. Every room.

The hotel was midtown, thirtieth floor. Jensen swept it. Marie checked the hallway. Then they were alone, and the silence was different because this was a hotel and hotels were where they'd started — years ago, when they were a secret, when these rooms were the only places they could be themselves.

"People keep staring," Shane said. He was at the window, Sixth Avenue below.

"People have always stared at us."

"Not like this."

"No." Ilya came to the window. "But the production assistant at Kimmel — the one with the clipboard? Her ears went red."

"I noticed."

"The man in the Yankees hat could not look at both of us at the same time. Back and forth. Like a tennis match."

"He was a fan."

"He was a fan who was also overwhelmed by how beautiful we are, Shane. We are, objectively, very beautiful men. Kimmel said it on television. The hotel woman gave us the wrong key twice."

"People get flustered by celebrities."

"We are celebrities?"

Shane looked at him. Ilya was grinning — the real one, the lopsided one from before all of this. The curls. The hazel eyes. The cleft chin, the stubble, the shoulders. Standing at a hotel window in New York in a blue suit, looking like something that shouldn't exist outside a museum.

"Stop looking at me like that," Shane said.

"Like what?"

"Like... oh, you know what you look like."

"I do know what I look like. I am number five on the Cosmo list. You are number one. Together we are — what — number six? Number three? I do not know how the math works."

"That's not how the math works."

"The math works however I say it works. I am the captain."

Shane's lips twitched in a half smile. Ilya saw it, pulled him in. They stood at the window, Ilya's arm around Shane's shoulders, four inches of height difference that meant Shane fit against Ilya's side like a piece that had been measured for exactly that space.

Seth Meyers was different from Kimmel.

Smaller studio, sharper energy. Where Kimmel was warm and broad, Meyers was quick. He'd done his homework — knew Shane's faceoff percentage, knew the Irina Foundation, had watched the Two Hockey Chicks breakdown of the Game 7 goal.

"I want to start with the pass," Meyers said backstage. "I've been watching hockey clips for a week and I think I actually like hockey now, which is going to ruin my social life."

"Welcome," Ilya said. "There is no going back."

The audience at 30 Rock was a New York audience — faster, more vocal, responding to wit over warmth. Shane was more comfortable here. He hadn't expected that. The New York speed was closer to how his brain worked — quick, precise, the joke arriving before the audience expected it.

Meyers played the goal clip. The same gasp.

"Multiple hockey analysts have said this pass shouldn't work," Meyers said. "The lane wasn't there."

"The lane was there for a half-second," Shane said. "I saw it. He was in the right place."

"He's always in the right place?"

"Yes."

"Must be nice."

"It is."

The audience laughed. Shane hadn't meant it as a joke.

Meyers pivoted. Hockey to camp, camp to Foundation, Foundation to the question underneath.

"You're both very visible right now," Meyers said. "For a lot of reasons. How are you handling that?"

"One day at a time," Ilya said. "We have always been visible. What is different now is that the visibility means something to people who are not hockey fans. That is privilege. Not always comfortable. But it's privilege."

"I saw the clip from outside Kimmel," Meyers said. "A teenager told you that you saved his life."

"Yes."

"What do you say to that?"

Ilya was quiet. The studio was quiet. Real silence.

"I say that he saved his own life," Ilya said. "I just play hockey."

The applause was the kind that means something landed and the room needed to mark it.

They talked about the suits. "Are you wearing matching suits on purpose?" "My mother-in-law chose them," Ilya said, and it got the biggest laugh of the segment. They talked about Anya. They talked about Ilya watching Quebecois reality television in a language he didn't speak.

"You need to come back," Meyers said. "This was one of the best conversations I've had on this show."

"We will bring the dog," Ilya said.

"Bring the dog. We'll put her on the desk."

"Anya would destroy your desk."

"She's welcome to."

The band played them out. The audience stood.

In the car, heading to the hotel, Ilya was quiet. Jensen in front. The city passing.

"You okay?" Shane asked.

"I am thinking about the teenager. The one outside Kimmel. The one with the flag on his jersey." Ilya was looking out the window. The cross glinted in the streetlights. "He was maybe sixteen. And he was shaking. And I think that is why they are afraid of us, Shane. Not the kiss. Not the Cup. The sixteen-year-old. The hope."

Shane put his hand on Ilya's knee. Ilya covered it.

They drove through the city. Recognized at every stop. The hotel. The restaurant. The lobby where a man in a suit said, "You're Rozanov and Hollander. My daughter watches your highlights every night. She's twelve. She wants to play hockey." Ilya signed his napkin. Shane shook his hand.

Everywhere. Every face that looked up and knew them.

It was real. It was terrifying. It was more than Shane had imagined when he was seventeen in Saskatchewan, looking across the ice at a Russian boy with light brown curls and a lopsided smirk that made him want to win more than he'd ever wanted anything.

The hotel room. Quiet. Shane showered. Ilya was on the bed when he came out — suit pants, white shirt, tie off, cross on his chest.

"We did it," Shane said.

"We did it."

Shane got into bed. Ilya pulled him in — Shane's back against Ilya's chest, Ilya's arm across his ribs, the cross against Shane's spine. Shane fit against him the way he always fit — compact, precise, held.

"Farrah says the clips are going," Shane said. "The teenager line. Six million impressions."

"Jinky does not sleep."

"Jinky is powered by Monster Energy and spite."

"Jinky is my favorite person on the internet."

They lay there. The city hummed. Somewhere in Canada, Hayden was running camp and Zane was running drills and Troy was being steady and the kids were learning to skate and Anya was at Shane's parents' house destroying the left slipper and Melinda was building the file and Martin was building the case and David was doing whatever David did when his family was elsewhere, which Shane suspected was worrying and calling Rupert and being the quiet structural father he had always been.

"Shane," Ilya said.

"Hm?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For... being you. For support and love. For being here next to me."

"Where else would I be?"

"Nowhere. There is nowhere else. But I am thanking you anyway."

Shane turned in Ilya's arms. Faced him. The hazel eyes in the dark. The cross between them.

"A little over a year," Shane said.

"Give or take."

"And then you're Canadian."

"And then I am Canadian."

"And then nobody can touch you."

Ilya's hand came to Shane's face. Thumb on his cheekbone, over the freckles. "Nobody can touch me now. I have you. And two former Special Forces operatives. And a mother-in-law who knows about Litvinenko."

Shane laughed softly.

"Go to sleep," Ilya said.

"You go to sleep."

"I will go to sleep as soon as you do."

"That's not how sleep works."

"It is how our sleep works. Close your eyes, Shane."

Shane closed his eyes. Ilya's hand on his face. The city outside. The unknown future in front of them.

He fell asleep.

Ilya

Chapter 9: Ilya

Canadian cameras ask harder questions. A basement podcast gets closer to the truth than any studio. Moscow finds a new word for what Ilya is. And a brother calls at midnight to say the thing that can't be unsaid. Then a lawyer sits at the kitchen table and explains what Russia can actually take — and it isn't what anyone expected.

The Canadian shows were different.

Not worse. Different. American talk shows were built around the assumption that the audience was being entertained. Canadian talk shows were built around the assumption that the audience was paying attention. Ilya found this both flattering and exhausting.

The CBC interview was first. *The National* had requested a sit-down — not the nightly broadcast, a special segment, pre-taped in a studio in Toronto with a journalist named Catherine Tremblay who had been covering politics for three decades. Silver-haired. She did not smile when she shook their hands.

Jensen and Marie cleared the studio. This had become routine — Jensen walking the space, Marie checking exits, both of them making a room safe without making it feel unsafe. The CBC crew watched with the specific Canadian discomfort of people who believed security details happened in other countries.

Catherine Tremblay sat across from them. Two cameras. No audience. No band.

"I want to start with the shooting," Tremblay said. No preamble. No congratulations. Straight in.

"Okay," Ilya said.

"Three shots were fired at you and your husband in a grocery store parking lot. One passed through your jacket sleeve. What was going through your mind?"

Ilya looked at Shane. Shane gave the small nod.

"I was not thinking," Ilya said. "I heard the first shot and I grabbed Shane and pulled him down. That is not thinking. That is reflex. The thinking came after."

"And what did the thinking tell you?"

"That someone had tried to kill us while we were buying ingredients for pelmeni."

Tremblay didn't blink. "You're a Russian citizen. You've been the subject of extensive coverage on Russian state television. Do you believe the shooting was connected?"

"I believe that when a government spends two weeks telling its people that a man is a traitor for kissing his husband, it is not surprising when someone acts on that message."

"Are you saying the Russian government is responsible?"

"I am saying the Russian government created the weather. I do not know who sent the storm."

Tremblay wrote something on her pad. Looked up.

"What do you want Canadians to know?"

"That I chose this country. That I am trying to become a citizen. And that someone is trying to make me afraid of that choice." He paused. "I am afraid. But I am not leaving."

Shane's hand was on his knee under the table.

The interview ran twenty-two minutes. Tremblay asked about the camp, the Foundation, the citizenship timeline. She asked Shane about the spreadsheet — she'd done her homework — and Shane explained it the way Shane explained things: precisely, with data, in sentences that left marks.

Afterward, Tremblay shook their hands again. She held Ilya's a beat longer.

"Be careful," she said.

The Daily with Debbie Dwyer was lighter. CTV daytime — four hosts, a studio audience, a format somewhere between news and conversation. The hosts were warm. The audience was warm.

They talked about the Cup. They talked about the dog. Debbie Dwyer — blond, mid-forties, the kind of host who made people feel like they were talking to a friend — asked Ilya what the hardest part of living in Canada was.

"Winter," he said. The audience laughed. "No. I am Russian. Winter is fine. The hardest part is that Canadians apologize for everything. I bumped into a man at the grocery store and he apologized to me. I was the one who bumped into him."

More laughter. Shane beside him, the half-smile, the quiet correction — "It wasn't a bump, it was more of a collision" — and the audience loved them the way audiences always did. Completely. Without reservation.

Afterward, outside the CTV studio, the fans were waiting. Thirty, maybe forty. Centaurs jerseys, rainbow flags, signs. One woman had brought her daughter, who was maybe eight, wearing a Hollander 24 jersey.

Across the street, a different group. Smaller — six people, maybe seven. They had signs too. One read **TAKE BACK HOCKEY**.

Another: **KEEP POLITICS OUT OF SPORTS**. A man in the middle, heavyset, ball cap, arms crossed, wearing a t-shirt with the #TakeBackHockey logo.

He wasn't shouting. He was watching. That was worse.

Jensen noticed before Ilya did. Ilya saw Jensen's eyes go to the group, assess, dismiss, and return to the crowd at the barricade. Not a threat. Not quite. But present. A reminder that the people who loved them and the people who wanted them gone lived on the same block.

Ilya signed jerseys. Shane signed programs. The little girl in the Hollander jersey was shaking. Her mother was crying. Shane crouched — all five-ten of him folding down to the girl's height — and said something Ilya couldn't hear, and the girl nodded, and Shane signed her jersey on the shoulder, where she could see it.

Across the street, the man in the ball cap watched.

Marie touched Ilya's elbow. Time.

In the car, Ilya looked back. The man was still there. Still watching. Still not shouting. The silence of him was the loudest thing on the street.

Two Hockey Chicks was different from everything.

It wasn't a studio. It was Sammy's house — a semi-detached in East York with a porch that needed painting and a front yard full of a four-year-old's evidence. A tricycle on its side. A plastic bucket with a shovel in it. Chalk drawings on the walkway, mostly circles and what might have been a dog.

The recording setup was in the basement — soundproofed, or close enough, with real microphones and a mixing board and framed prints of hockey plays on the walls. It was professional. It was also clearly

a room that shared a house with a preschooler, because there was a stuffed dinosaur on the console and a juice box behind the monitor.

Trix was already there when they arrived, sitting cross-legged on the basement floor with her laptop and her cat — a massive orange tabby named Borje, after Borje Salming, who had come in a carrier and was now sitting on the mixing board like he owned it. Trix's hair was purple now, buzzed on one side. She looked up and said, "Oh, good, you're real," as if she'd been prepared for the possibility that they were not.

Sammy came down the stairs with coffee. She was smaller than Ilya had expected — five-three, dark hair in a ponytail, wearing a Voyageurs hoodie that had seen several seasons. From upstairs, the sound of a television — cartoons, the bright, insistent kind.

"Noah's with my mom," Sammy said. "She took him for the afternoon so I could do this without someone asking for goldfish crackers every six minutes."

Jensen swept the basement. Marie checked the windows — small, high, ground level. Sammy watched this happen.

"There are soldiers in my basement," Sammy whispered to Trix.

"Former soldiers," Marie said without turning around.

"She heard me."

"I hear everything."

Sammy looked at Ilya. "I love her."

"She is very good at her job," Ilya said.

The recording was not an interview. It was a conversation. That was the difference — Sammy and Trix didn't have questions prepared. They had two women who knew hockey and loved hockey and had

spent a year building something that treated Shane and Ilya like people instead of content.

"Okay," Sammy said, adjusting her headphones. Borje had moved from the mixing board to Trix's lap. "Episode 39. Two Hockey Chicks. And today we have Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander in my basement. In my actual basement. Where my son watches Paw Patrol. Trix, can you confirm this is real?"

"Confirmed. Also, Ilya Rozanov is taller than my refrigerator."

"I am taller than most refrigerators," Ilya said.

"He talks! Okay. First things first. How are you? Real answer."

Ilya looked at Shane.

"We are tired," Ilya said. "We are scared some of the time. Angry some of the time. And also very happy some of the time, because we won the Stanley Cup three weeks ago and I think people have forgotten this. Including us."

"We haven't forgotten," Trix said.

"Good. Because Shane made a pass that should not have worked and I scored a goal I will be telling my grandchildren about."

"Let's talk about that pass," Sammy said, and for twenty minutes they talked about hockey. The systems, the plays, the way Shane found the gap and the way Ilya knew where to be. Sammy knew hockey the way coaches knew hockey — she saw patterns, asked questions that made Ilya think in ways press conferences never did.

"The thing that kills me," Sammy said, "is the trust. You can see it on the replay. Shane doesn't look. He throws the puck into a lane that doesn't exist for anyone except Ilya, and Ilya is there."

"He is always there," Shane said.

"You said that on Kimmel."

"It's true everywhere."

Trix made a small sound. Borje purred.

"Okay," Sammy said. "I need to ask about the other stuff. And I want you to know — you don't have to answer anything."

"Ask," Ilya said.

"What's it like watching yourself on Russian state television?"

Ilya was quiet. The basement was quiet. Upstairs, faintly, a cartoon jingle.

"It is like watching a stranger who has my face," he said. "They show the kiss — always the kiss — but they crop it. Shane is not in the frame. Because the story they are telling is not about two men who love each other. It is about one Russian man who has betrayed his country. They need Shane to not exist for the story to work."

"And the commentary?"

"They use words like *provocation* and *defiance.* As if I kissed my husband on the ice to make a political statement. I kissed him because we won the Stanley Cup and he was there and I love him."

"But it is political," Sammy said. Carefully. "Whether you want it to be or not."

"Yes. Because they made it political. And now I have to be political because they did not give me the choice to be anything else."

Shane's hand found the small of his back.

They talked for an hour. The camp, the kids, Anya and the slippers, the citizenship. Sammy asked about the torn jacket. Ilya described it — the furrow, the lining, the distance.

"I keep thinking about it," Trix said. "Since the day it happened. The distance between — I can't."

"The distance was nothing," Ilya said.

"The distance was everything," Shane said.

The episode ended with Sammy asking what they wanted people to do.

"Watch hockey," Ilya said. "Come to games. Bring your kids. Do not let anyone make you small."

"That's the title," Sammy said. "Right, Trix?"

"That's the title."

They stopped recording. Sammy cried. She apologized for crying. "I'm a mess. I have a four-year-old, I haven't slept in three years, and two hockey legends are in my basement."

"We are not legends," Ilya said.

"You're in my basement. You're legends."

Ilya hugged her. She disappeared into his chest.

Trix hugged Shane. Shane accepted it with the careful stiffness of a man who was not good at being hugged by strangers but who understood that this one had been earned.

"Thank you," Shane said. "For everything you've done."

"Just keep going," Sammy said, wiping her eyes. "That's all. Just keep going."

The Russian coverage got worse.

He shouldn't have looked. Galina had told him not to look. Shane had told him not to look. He looked.

Channel One had run a new segment. Eight minutes — an eternity on state television, which meant someone had decided Ilya Rozanov was worth eight minutes. The anchor — the same blonde woman, the same contempt — had a new photograph. Not the kiss. The Kimmel appearance. Ilya and Shane in the blue suits. The chyron: ROZANOV PROMOTES DEVIANT LIFESTYLE ON AMERICAN TELEVISION.

Promotes. As if telling a story about his dog was an act of aggression.

The segment included clips from Kimmel — dubbed into Russian, a stranger's voice coming out of his mouth saying words that were almost what he'd said. The translation was creative. "He knows where I am" became something closer to "We are inseparable," which was not the same sentence but served the narrative — two men performing their deviance for American cameras.

Then the analyst. A man at a desk — one of the state-adjacent commentators who said whatever the Kremlin needed said without the Kremlin saying it. He used the word *propaganda*. He used the word *betrayal*. He said that Rozanov had forfeited his right to call himself Russian by "celebrating a union that Russian law recognizes as a violation of public morality."

Forfeited his right to call himself Russian.

Ilya closed the laptop.

NTV had run a panel discussion. Four people. Three said variations of the same thing — disgrace, symptom of decay, strip his citizenship. The fourth, a younger woman who looked like she'd been placed there to lose the argument, said something about human rights and was talked over for the remaining six minutes.

Komsomolskaya Pravda ran a follow-up op-ed. The same writer. But the tone had shifted — not false concern anymore. Open hostility. The thesis was no longer that Ilya was a victim of Western influence. The thesis was that Ilya was an agent of it. By appearing on television, by refusing to be quiet, he was actively working against Russian interests. The word used was *враг*.

Enemy.

He told Galina. She was quiet for a long time.

"How does it feel to read that word?"

"Like being erased. Not killed. Erased. Like the country I was born in has decided I do not exist, and the version of me they have created — the traitor, the enemy — that is the one that is real."

"And what do you want to do with that feeling?"

"I want to call my brother."

He called Alexei.

Midnight in Moscow. Alexei answered on the fourth ring — he'd been asleep. Ilya should have waited.

"Ilya." Rough with sleep. Then sharper. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened. I am calling."

"It is midnight."

"I know."

Sheets. A door closing. Alexei moving to another room, away from his wife, his daughter.

"I saw the shows," Alexei said. The control was there, but thin. "The American ones. The Canadian ones. They are everywhere here. Your face on every screen."

"I know."

"I told you to go low profile." The control slipping. "I called you and I told you to be careful, to be quiet, and you go on American television and tell the whole world — on *Kimmel*, Ilya. They played it on Channel One. They played your quote and three analysts took turns explaining what it meant for Russian dignity."

"It meant I scored a goal."

"It meant nothing to them. They care that you exist and that you will not shut up about existing." His breath. Hard. "I am a police officer in Moscow. My colleagues have seen those clips. My superior has seen them. Do you understand what it is like to be the brother of the man Channel One calls an enemy of Russia?"

Ilya closed his eyes. The cross against his chest.

"I am sorry," Ilya said.

"I don't want sorry. I want you to think. Everything you do on a screen over there arrives here in a different language. Not Russian — a different *meaning*. The kiss is not a kiss here. The interview is not an interview. It is evidence. They are building a case, Ilya. Not legal. Public. They are making you into a symbol and symbols get destroyed."

"I know."

"Do you? Because a symbol cannot come home. A man can come home. A symbol cannot."

"I am not coming home, Alexei."

Silence.

"I know," Alexei said. And something gave way in his voice — not crying, but the sound of a structure under too much weight.

"For your sake, I hope you don't. I hope you never set foot in Russia again. Because if you do — if they get you back here — I cannot help you. I am a police officer and I cannot help my own brother."

"Yes."

"Then stop calling me at midnight. And for God's sake, stop going on television."

"I can't stop."

"I know. That is why I am afraid."

Silence. The midnight line between Ottawa and Moscow.

"How is my niece?" Ilya asked.

"She is six now. She drew a picture of a hockey player last week. I did not ask who it was."

Ilya's throat closed.

"I love you, *moy brat,*" Ilya said. In Russian. Fast, like their mother used to say it — like something you said before the door closed because you never knew when the door would close for the last time.

"I love you. Don't call again for a while. For me. *Please*."

He hung up.

Ilya sat in the kitchen. The phone screen went dark. When Shane came downstairs an hour later, drawn by the absence of Ilya in the bed, he found him at the table with cold coffee.

"Alexei?" Shane asked.

"Yes."

Shane sat down. Put his hand on the table, palm up. Waited. After a while, Ilya put his hand in Shane's.

The threats were not only Russian.

Hayden called on a Thursday. Not the casual Hayden voice — the other one, the one that meant Pike was handling something and needed help deciding how much to handle.

"We got letters at camp," Hayden said. "Physical letters. Mailed to the facility."

"What kind of letters?"

"The kind I'm not going to read to you. The kind where someone took the time to write them out by hand, address an envelope, buy a stamp, and mail them to a hockey camp for children."

Ilya was quiet.

"I called the police," Hayden said. "They're taking them. Craig took photos first. I didn't show Ryan or Fabian. I didn't show the parents."

"How many?"

"Seven. All this week."

"Hayden—"

"The camp is fine. The kids are fine. Nobody saw them except me and Craig." A pause. "They know your address, Ilya. Not this address — the camp address. But they know where the kids skate."

Ilya told Jensen. Jensen told Rupert. Rupert called back within the hour with a plan — enhanced perimeter at the camp facility, a review of the mailing, coordination with Ottawa police.

It was handled. It was professional. It didn't stop Ilya from standing at the kitchen window for a long time, looking at the street, thinking about twenty-eight kids in borrowed gear learning to stop without falling.

Two days later, in Toronto, walking from the hotel to the car after the Two Hockey Chicks recording, a man on the sidewalk. Not the ball cap man from outside CTV — a different man, younger, mid-twenties, in a Leafs jacket. He was standing near the corner, and as Ilya and Shane passed, Jensen and Marie flanking, the man said it.

Not shouted. Said. At normal volume, the way you'd say good morning.

"Fucking faggots."

Jensen's hand moved — not to a weapon, just a repositioning, his body shifting between Ilya and the man in one fluid step. Marie closed the distance on Shane's side.

The man didn't move. He stood there, hands in his pockets, and watched them pass. He was smiling.

Ilya kept walking. His legs kept moving. His body did the thing it had learned to do — the thing Galina called the override, where the animal brain wanted to stop, to turn, to confront, and the trained brain kept the feet going because stopping was what they wanted. They wanted the confrontation. They wanted the story: *Hockey Player Fights Fan on Toronto Street*. They wanted to take the thing that made you human — the anger, the hurt, the impulse to defend yourself — and turn it into proof that you were the problem.

He kept walking.

In the car, Shane's hand found his. Shane's face was blank. The flat, controlled blankness that Ilya had seen a hundred times — the feelings routed somewhere internal.

"I heard him," Shane said.

"I know."

"Marie almost moved."

"I would like to see Marie kick bigot ass."

They drove in silence for a while.

"It's the ones who aren't shouting," Ilya said. "The ones who say it quietly. Like a fact. Like the weather."

Shane squeezed his hand. Didn't let go.

The extradition story broke on a Tuesday.

Not from Russia — from Reuters. One paragraph buried in a wire story about Russian foreign policy: *Russian officials are reportedly exploring legal avenues to compel the return of Russian nationals accused of violating domestic statutes while residing abroad. Sources within the Foreign Ministry declined to name specific individuals but confirmed that "multiple cases" are under review.*

It didn't name Ilya. It didn't have to.

Within two hours, every newsroom had connected the dots. CTV ran the item beside Ilya's photograph. CNN put it in the chyron. *The Globe and Mail* ran an analysis: **RUSSIA SIGNALS POSSIBLE EXTRADITION PUSH — AND ROZANOV MAY BE THE TEST CASE.**

Shane called Melinda. Melinda called Martin. Martin was at the house by four.

The briefcase. The rumpled blazer. The OSGOODE LAW t-shirt. The glasses. He sat at the kitchen table and uncapped his pen with his teeth.

"Let's talk about what's real and what's noise," Martin said.

Melinda was on speakerphone. Shane had his laptop. Yuna was by the window. David was standing.

"First. Can Russia extradite you from Canada?"

"No," Ilya said. "Right?"

"Right. But the 'why' matters." He drew something on his pad. "No extradition treaty between Canada and Russia. Even if Russia made a formal diplomatic request, Canada would refuse. The basis would be *Article 6.21* — Russia's law against so-called propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations. Canadian law does not recognize this as a crime. Dual criminality requirement fails. Kissing your husband is not a crime in Canada."

"Could they get Interpol to do it?" Shane asked. "I read something on Reddit..."

"Russia could request a Red Notice. Interpol has a rule — they don't issue notices for cases that are political in nature. A case built on Article 6.21 is definitionally political. Interpol would reject it. Even if they didn't, Canada would refuse to honor it."

"So the extradition is noise," Shane said.

"The extradition is noise." Martin held up the pen. "But noise has consequences. The Reuters story exists. The perception that Russia is pursuing Ilya through legal channels — that changes behavior. It affects the citizenship application. Public opinion. Sponsors. The league."

"What else can they do?" Yuna asked.

Martin took off the glasses. Cleaned them on his shirt. Put them back.

"The passport."

The room shifted.

"Russia can invalidate Ilya's passport. They've been doing it — to journalists, to dissidents, to anyone who embarrasses the state from abroad. Since 2022, they've expanded the list of offenses that trigger revocation. Discrediting the military, undesirable activities, violations of public morality. Article 6.21 fits."

He looked at Ilya.

"Your permanent resident status is not affected. I want to be very clear. Your right to live and work in Canada comes from your PR card, not your Russian passport. Russia can invalidate every Russian document you hold and it does not change your status here."

"But," Shane said.

"But without a valid passport from any country, you cannot travel internationally. No international flights. No crossing the US border for away games. You cannot leave Canada until you obtain a new travel document or become a citizen."

The kitchen was quiet.

"For a hockey player who plays half his games in the United States," Martin said, "that's not theoretical."

Ilya looked at the window. The season started in October. If Russia pulled his passport before then, he couldn't play road games. Half the season. Maybe the whole thing, depending on how the league handled it.

"There are solutions," Martin said. "Two tracks."

"Tell us."

"Track one: Melinda continues the citizenship application and pushes for expedited processing. Canadian citizenship, Canadian passport,

end of story." He looked at the speakerphone. "Mel?"

Melinda's voice: "The file is strong. Every piece of this — the shooting, the call, the media, now the extradition signaling — strengthens the argument for humanitarian consideration. Normal timeline is twelve months from where we are. I'm going to argue for six."

"Six months," Shane said.

"Aggressive. But the evidence supports it."

"Track two," Martin said. "I prepare a refugee protection claim. We don't file it yet. But we build the package. If Russia moves on the passport before the citizenship comes through, we file. The claim gives Ilya protected person status and a Refugee Travel Document — it functions like a passport, recognized internationally, including the US."

"And if Russia doesn't move on the passport?" Shane asked.

"Then we don't file. The citizenship comes through on Melinda's timeline. The refugee claim stays in the drawer."

"But if we file," Yuna said, "it's public."

"If we file, it's the biggest immigration story in Canadian history. A Russian Stanley Cup champion seeking asylum because his country wants to punish him for being married to a man. Every newsroom. Every parliament."

"Is that good or bad?" Ilya asked.

"Both. A spotlight protects and exposes. The question is whether you're willing to stand in it."

Ilya looked at Shane. Shane's face had gone still. Calculating.

"We're already in it," Shane said.

Martin wrote something on his pad.

"One more thing. The threatening call — the one about the labor colony. I've consulted with colleagues. That call constitutes a threat under Canadian criminal law. And if it came from the government, it's transnational repression. Canada has been tracking these cases. The RCMP has a unit."

"We go to the RCMP," Shane said.

"Melinda sends the file to the RCMP and Global Affairs Canada. The more institutions that know about this threat, the harder it is for anyone to act on it."

"Do it," Ilya said. "All of it. The citizenship, the refugee package — build it, don't file yet. The RCMP. Global Affairs."

"That's a lot of moving pieces."

"I am Russian and I play hockey. Moving pieces is what I do."

Martin's mouth twitched.

"I'll need the full timeline," he said. "Everything from your brother's first call to today. Every document, every data point."

"Shane's spreadsheet," Melinda said over the phone, "is the most organized piece of evidence I've seen in twelve years of practice."

"I will send it tonight," Shane said.

Martin stood. Picked up the briefcase. "I'll have the refugee package drafted within two weeks. Melinda and I coordinate on the expedited submission. In the meantime — document everything. Every Russian media mention. Every threat. Every contact."

He shook Ilya's hand. Shane's. Held Yuna's a beat longer.

He left. Melinda hung up.

Yuna picked up her wine. Drank it.

"I like him," she said.

"Everyone likes Martin," Shane said.

"I don't like him because he's likeable. I like him because he's angry. You can see it behind the glasses. He's been angry for a long time." She set the glass down. "That's the kind of lawyer you want."

That night, Shane was on his laptop. Ilya lay on the bed and watched the ceiling.

"Shane."

"Hm."

"If I become a refugee — if we file — I can never go back to Russia."

Shane's typing stopped.

"I know," Shane said.

"I could never go back anyway. But the claim makes it official. Permanent. I would be saying, to the world, that Russia is not safe for me. Alexei will hear that. And whatever door is still open — the tiny one, the one I pretend doesn't exist, the one where maybe things change and I can see Moscow again — that door closes."

Shane closed the laptop. Turned on the bed. The dark eyes. The freckles.

"Russia closed it," Shane said. "Not you."

"I know."

"You're not closing a door. You're opening one."

Ilya pressed his thumb into the cross.

"I have not been to Moscow in four years," he said. "I have not seen Alexei in person in four years. My niece was small the last time I held her. She is six now. She drew a hockey player and Alexei did not ask who it was."

Shane moved closer. His hand on Ilya's face.

"We'll figure it out," Shane said.

"Some things don't have a figure-it-out."

"Then we'll make one."

Ilya turned his face into Shane's palm.

"Okay," Ilya said. "Build the files. Both of them. Let Martin and Melinda work. We stand in the spotlight."

"And you become Canadian."

"And if I don't?"

"You will."

"How do you know?"

"Because I have a spreadsheet."

Ilya laughed. The real one. The one from below the fear and the grief and the word *враг*. *Enemy*. The one that was still his.

"Your spreadsheet is not a legal document."

"My spreadsheet has been cited by a twelve-year immigration attorney as the most organized piece of evidence she's ever seen."

"Your Excel skill is next- level."

"My spreadsheet is going to save your life."

Ilya pulled him in. Shane's back against his chest. The cross between them.

He was almost asleep when Shane's phone buzzed. Shane reached for it. Read. The blue light on his face.

"It's my dad," Shane said.

"What does he want?"

"He says he needs us to come to the house tomorrow at noon. He wants us to meet someone."

"Who?"

"He doesn't say. Just — 'someone who can help. Please come at noon. Pack an overnight bag.'"

Ilya lifted his head. "Your father is being mysterious."

"My father is never mysterious."

"That is what makes it mysterious."

Shane stared at the phone. Then typed back: *We'll be there.*

He put the phone down. Ilya pulled him back in.

"Shane."

"Hm."

"Your father knows everyone."

"My father works at the Treasury Board."

"Your father knows everyone and one day you are going to accept this."

Shane was quiet for a moment. Then: "I guess we'll find out at noon."

Outside, Ottawa held onto its last light. Inside, Ilya held onto Shane.

Tomorrow there would be a meeting. Tonight there was this.

Shane

Chapter 10: Shane

His dad said noon, and bring a bag. The bag was for one night. The destination was need-to-know. Turns out Shane didn't know a lot of things about his father — including who he played intramural hockey with in 1982.

His dad's text had said noon, and bring a bag. Shane and Ilya arrived at eleven forty-seven with one duffel, Anya's carrier, and no idea where they were going.

Yuna answered the door in slacks and a blouse. Not the jeans and Team Canada fleece. Not the Yuna who yelled at the television during Voyageur games and threatened to call the coach herself. This was the other Yuna — the one who'd spent fourteen years managing a career, the one who understood rooms before she entered them.

"You're early," Yuna said.

"We are on time," Ilya said. "Being early is Shane personality."

"It's not a personality. It's a decision."

"Is compulsion."

Yuna kissed Ilya on the cheek. Took the carrier from Shane's hand — Anya was already whining, because Anya knew this house and this house meant the slipper and the slipper meant war. Yuna set the carrier down and opened the gate and Anya was out and gone, claws on the hardwood, headed for the closet by the front door

where his dad kept the pair she'd been slowly destroying since Thanksgiving.

His dad was in the kitchen. Suit. Not a work suit — a different suit, darker, better cut. Shane had seen his father in ten thousand outfits across thirty years and had never seen this one.

"Who are we meeting?" Shane asked.

His dad set down the coffee. "Someone I should have called weeks ago."

"That's not an answer."

"No."

Shane looked at his mother. Yuna's face gave him nothing. She was pouring water into Anya's travel bowl with the focus of someone performing surgery.

"Mom."

"Your father will explain on the way."

"On the way where?"

Someone knocked on the front door. Three knocks, evenly spaced, the kind that didn't belong to anyone who'd been to this house before.

His dad went to the door. Two men stood on the porch. Dark suits, earpieces, the posture of people who'd been trained to stand in doorways. One was shorter, thick through the shoulders, with a shaved head and a face that had been places. The other was younger, taller, hands folded in front of him.

"Mr. Hollander," the shorter one said. "We're here for the twelve o'clock."

"Come in. We're almost ready."

Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya's face hadn't changed. That was the tell — when Ilya's face didn't change, it meant the thing happening was bigger than the performance could cover.

"Shane," his dad said. "We're taking a flight."

"A flight."

"About four and a half hours. We'll be back tomorrow afternoon."

"Where?"

"Edmonton."

The word sat in the kitchen. Edmonton. Four and a half hours. Men with earpieces. His father in a suit Shane had never seen.

"Jensen and Marie will come with us," his dad said. "They've been briefed."

Jensen was in the living room already — Shane hadn't heard him come in, which was normal, because Jensen moved like weather. Marie was by the back door, doing what Marie always did, which was existing at the periphery of every room in a way that made the room safe without making it feel surveilled.

"Dad," Shane said. "Who is in Edmonton?"

His father looked at him. The reading glasses were in his breast pocket. The coffee was going cold on the counter. Anya had found the slipper and was dragging it under the dining table.

"An old friend," his dad said. "From McGill."

The car was black, unmarked, driven by a woman who didn't introduce herself. The shorter man from the porch sat in the

passenger seat. The second car followed — Jensen, Marie, and the taller man from the porch.

Shane sat behind the driver. Ilya beside him. Yuna and his dad in the third row of the SUV, Anya's carrier between them.

Nobody spoke for the first ten minutes. Shane counted streetlights. Fourteen before he stopped.

"Your friend from McGill," Shane said.

His dad's voice came from behind him. "Cameron McReady."

The name didn't land immediately. It sat in Shane's processing for three seconds — a name, just a name, someone from McGill, an old friend — and then the recognition hit like a slap shot to the chest.

Cameron McReady. Prime Minister of Canada.

"You know the Prime Minister," Shane said. "That Cameron McReady."

"We were in the same residence at McGill. First year. Molson Hall."

"You've never mentioned this."

"It wasn't relevant."

Shane turned in his seat. His father's face was the same face it always was — the steady, composed, Treasury Board face, the face that had sat across from deputy ministers and auditors general for three decades. Except there was something underneath it now. Something that looked like the thing Shane felt when he knew he'd made the right play but didn't know if the puck would go in.

"Not relevant," Shane said.

"Shane—"

"You have been friends with the Prime Minister of Canada for — how long?"

"We met in 1982."

"Forty-two years."

"Give or take."

Ilya put his hand on Shane's knee.

"Your father knows everyone," Ilya said. "I have told you this."

"You said Treasury Board. You said institutional connections. You didn't say you went to school with the Prime Minister."

"Same floor, first year. He was pre-law. I was public administration. We played intramural hockey together."

"You played hockey with the Prime Minister."

"He wasn't the Prime Minister then. He was a loud Scottish kid who couldn't skate backwards."

The car turned onto the airport road. Not the main terminal — a side entrance, a gate, a tarmac with a plane that was not a commercial plane.

Shane looked at it. Looked at his father.

"I called him," his dad said. "After the shooting. I should have called him before. I didn't because I thought — I hoped — it wouldn't get this far. When the threatening call came, I picked up the phone."

"And he answered."

"He always answers."

The plane was small. Government, maybe — or private, Shane couldn't tell. Eight seats, a table, a cockpit door. The pilot didn't turn around. The co-pilot nodded.

Shane took the window. Ilya took the aisle. The carrier went under the seat, Anya quiet inside it — she'd been on planes before, she knew the drill, she just pressed herself flat and waited.

His parents sat across the narrow aisle. Jensen and Marie were two rows back. The men from the porch were not on the plane.

The engine noise filled the cabin. Shane stared out the window at Ottawa getting small.

"Tell me about him," Shane said.

His dad leaned forward. "Cameron McReady. Born in Glasgow, came to Canada at twelve. Father was an engineer at Syncrude. Mother taught primary school. McGill for undergrad, Dalhousie for law."

He paused. "Went into public service instead of practice. Then politics. MP for Edmonton-Strathcona at forty-six. Party leader at fifty-four. PM at sixty."

"He's been PM for—"

"Five years."

"And you've been in touch the whole time."

"We used to go fishing. Every July. Did for twenty years. But people get busy." His dad paused. "He knows about you. Your career. About Ilya. He's been following this since the kiss at the finals."

"Following it how?"

"He watches hockey, Shane."

"He watches hockey?"

"Of course he does, he is Canadian."

Ilya made a sound. Not a laugh. The shape of one.

"I like your father more every day," Ilya said.

Yuna had her phone out, scrolling. Shane recognized the motion — she was reading everything, the way she always read everything, building the picture before she entered the room. She looked up.

"What should we expect?" she asked.

"Dinner," his dad said. "Edith will have cooked. Cameron doesn't do formal when he doesn't have to. Expect the house, the kitchen, possibly grandchildren."

"Grandchildren," Shane said.

"He has six. Two of the younger ones are usually around."

Shane processed this. The Prime Minister of Canada had grandchildren and a wife who cooked and a house in Edmonton and he played intramural hockey badly and he'd been his father's friend for over forty years and Shane had never known.

He'd met a Prime Minister before. Jeremy Tierney, at a reception in Montreal — Shane's second year as captain of the Voyageurs. Tierney had shaken his hand, congratulated him on the Cup, posed for a photo. Fifteen minutes. Staff on all sides. Every word calibrated.

That was what meeting a Prime Minister was. Official. Managed. Forgettable.

This was a flight to Edmonton with a bag packed for one night and his dog in a carrier and his mother reading her phone and his father wearing a suit he'd never seen.

He turned to the window. The clouds were lit from above, the sun still up at this altitude. Below them, the country stretched — Ontario giving way to the prairies, the geometry of farmland, the long flat truth of Canada.

Ilya's hand found his.

"You are doing the thing," Ilya said.

"What thing."

"The thing where you are recalculating everything you have ever known about your father."

"I'm not."

"Your jaw is tight."

Shane unclenched it. Ilya's thumb moved across his knuckles.

"My father played intramural hockey with the Prime Minister," Shane said.

"Yes."

"And never told me."

"He is telling you now."

Shane looked at his parents. His dad was reading a real newspaper. Yuna was on her phone. They looked like they were going to a cottage for the weekend, not to the private residence of the most powerful person in the country.

"How are you calm?" Shane asked his mother.

Yuna looked up. "I've known Cameron for twenty years. He cries at movies and throws up after drinking too much. He's a person who shits like the rest of us, Shane."

Edmonton at dusk. The city spread out flat and wide, the river valley cutting through it, the sky enormous in the way prairie skies were enormous — too much of it, more than a person needed.

Another car. Another driver who didn't introduce herself. Jensen and Marie in the follow car.

The streets residential, then more residential, then a neighborhood with mature trees and houses set back from the road. Big lots. Old money or government money or both.

Then the RCMP vehicles. Two of them, unmarked but obvious — the way they were parked, the way the officers stood, the particular quality of attention that said this block was being watched.

They pulled up to a Georgian Colonial-style red-brick residence. Not a mansion — just a big house. Two stories, a wide porch, a lawn that had been recently mowed.

Two kids' bikes leaned against the garage. A garden along the side with tomato cages and stakes. A welcome mat that said COME IN, WE'RE NICE.

Shane stared at the welcome mat.

The front door opened before they reached it. A woman — mid sixties, gray hair cut short, an apron over a blue dress, reading glasses pushed up on her head. She had flour on her wrist.

"David Hollander," she said. "Get in here before Cam wears a hole in the kitchen floor." She looked past him. "Yuna. It's been too long. Come here."

The two women hugged on the porch. Not a polite hug — a real one, the kind that came from twenty years of fishing trips and Christmas cards and the specific friendship of women whose husbands worked too much.

Then Edith looked at Shane. And at Ilya. And something moved across her face — not pity, not sympathy, something more private.

"You must be Shane," she said. "You look like your mother."

"Everyone says that," Shane said.

"And you must be Ilya." She looked up. Way up. "Oh, you are tall."

"Am average for Russian, ma'am," Ilya said.

"You are not average for anything. Come in. Take your shoes off — Cam has a thing about shoes." She spotted the carrier. "Is that the dog?"

"That is Anya," Ilya said.

"Let her out. The grandkids have been asking about her since David told us you were coming."

Two children materialized from somewhere inside the house — a girl, maybe five, in a Centaurs jersey a little too big on her, and a boy, seven or eight, who had his grandfather's red hair and was already on his knees reaching for the carrier gate.

"Careful," Shane said. "She's nervous around—"

Anya exploded from the carrier, licked the boy's face, and was immediately on her back with the girl rubbing her stomach. The nervous dog who hid under the couch during thunderstorms and couldn't handle the vacuum cleaner had decided that the Prime Minister's grandchildren were the finest people she'd ever met.

"She's very nervous," Ilya said.

"I can see that," Edith said.

The house smelled like roast beef and something baked. The hallway had family photos — decades of them, a wall-mounted chronicle of a marriage and the lives it had produced.

Cameron young, red-haired, laughing at a podium. Cameron with Edith on a dock somewhere, both of them sunburned. Kids in graduation gowns. Babies in hospital blankets.

A photo of Cameron and his dad on a boat, each holding a fish, both of them twenty years younger and ten pounds lighter.

Shane stopped at that one.

His father and the Prime Minister, standing in a boat, holding pickerel, grinning like idiots. His dad was wearing a hat Shane had never seen. Cameron was wearing a shirt that said REEL MEN FISH.

"Nineteen ninety-eight," his dad said behind him. "Kenora. He caught three. I caught five. He's never gotten over it."

Shane looked at him. "You're competitive about fish?"

"I'm competitive about everything. Where do you think you got it?"

A voice from deeper in the house — big, carrying, the kind of voice that filled a room before the body entered it.

"David bloody Hollander. Did you bring the good Scotch or the cheap Scotch?"

"I brought wine, Cam. Like a civilized person."

Cameron McReady came around the corner.

Six-two, broad, red-going-gray hair, a face that had spent sixty-five years laughing and arguing and standing in wind. He was wearing a cardigan. A *cardigan*. Slippers. The Prime Minister of Canada in slippers.

He grabbed Shane's father in a hug that lifted his dad's feet off the ground.

"You old bastard," Cameron said. Scottish accent still there after fifty years, worn down but not gone. "You should have called me sooner."

"I called you when it was time."

"It was time after the shooting. You're stubborn."

"I'm careful."

"You're stubborn and careful. Worst combination." Cameron let him go. Turned to Yuna. "Yuna. You look better every time I see you. How do you do it?"

"Spite," Yuna said. "And the blood of my enemies."

Cameron roared. The sound bounced off the hallway walls.

Then he turned to Shane.

The roar stopped. The big face went still. And for a moment, Shane saw what Cameron McReady looked like when he wasn't performing — when the volume dropped and the real man looked out. He had blue eyes. They were wet.

"Shane," Cameron said. "I've watched you play since you got drafted. Your father sent me every game."

"Every game," his dad said.

"Every bloody game. I have opinions about your wrist shot that I will share later and you will disagree with all of them." He put both hands on Shane's shoulders. Solid hands. Heavy. "I'm glad you're here."

Shane had met the previous PM in a ballroom in Montreal with two hundred people and a photographer. Tierney had been polished,

pleasant, precise. The meeting had lasted the length of a handshake.

This was a man in a cardigan with wet eyes standing in a hallway that smelled like roast beef, holding Shane's shoulders like he was just someone's son. Because to Cameron, that's what he was. His dad's boy.

Then Ilya.

Cameron looked up at him. Ilya had an inch on the Prime Minister — one of the few people in any room who didn't have to look up very far.

"Ilya Rozanov," Cameron said. "My granddaughter is wearing a Hollander jersey and my grandson has your poster on his wall and I have watched you play the most beautiful hockey I have ever seen in my life." He put his hand on Ilya's arm. "You are a national bloody treasure and you have brought glory to your city and to this country and we intend to keep you safe."

Ilya's hand went to his chest. The cross.

"Thank you," Ilya said.

"Don't thank me yet. I haven't done anything yet. Come in. Edith made pie."

They ate in the kitchen. Not the dining room — the kitchen, around a table that had been expanded with a leaf to fit everyone. Roast beef, potatoes, green beans, bread that Edith had made that afternoon. The grandchildren ate at a small table in the corner, Anya stationed between them, receiving offerings.

Jensen and Marie were in the living room. Shane had seen Jensen do the sweep when they entered — the quiet walk, the window

check, the exits catalogued. Marie had accepted a cup of tea from Edith and was sitting near the front window, watching the street.

"She can eat with us," Edith had said.

"I'm fine here, ma'am. The tea is perfect."

Cameron talked through dinner. He talked the way the ocean moved — constantly, with force, in every direction. He told the story of Shane's father at McGill, how he'd once argued with a professor for forty minutes about amortization schedules until the professor conceded. He told the story of a fishing trip where a storm came up and Cameron had fallen in the lake.

He told Ilya about watching him play for Boston, about the goal against Tampa in overtime that Cameron said was the best individual effort he'd seen in twenty years of watching hockey.

"Better than Gretzky?" Ilya said.

"Don't push it."

Edith and Yuna talked at the other end of the table. Shane caught pieces — the Foundation, the camp, Yuna's plans for the fall, Edith's garden. Normal things. The things two women who'd known each other for twenty years talked about while their husbands talked about everything else.

Shane ate. He watched. He was doing the thing he always did in new rooms — running the calculation, reading the variables, trying to determine the shape of the conversation that hadn't started yet. Because this was dinner, but it wasn't just dinner. This was the Prime Minister's kitchen, and somewhere between the roast beef and the pie, the conversation would turn.

It turned with coffee.

The grandchildren were upstairs. Anya had gone with them, which was either a sign of extraordinary trust or extraordinary poor judgment on the dog's part. Edith cleared the plates. Cameron poured coffee from a pot that looked older than Shane.

"All right," Cameron said. The voice was different now. Still warm, still him, but the register had dropped.

"Your da's told me everything. I've read the coverage. I've been briefed by my office, though I'll tell you the briefings are three days behind what Yuna emails me."

"I'm thorough," Yuna said.

"Also extremely efficient. Always have been." He sat down. The cardigan, the coffee, the kitchen. Nothing about this looked like a meeting with the Prime Minister.

Everything about it was.

"Tell me where things stand."

Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya nodded.

Shane told him. Not the emotional version — the structural one. The citizenship timeline. Melinda's expedited argument. Martin's dual-track strategy.

The shooting, the call, the extradition signaling. The passport threat.

The legal ramifications.

Cameron listened. He didn't interrupt. His coffee went untouched.

When Shane finished, Cameron was quiet for a while.

"The passport," Cameron said. "That's the knife."

"Yes."

"If they pull it before the citizenship clears—"

"He can't leave Canada. Can't play away games. Can't cross the US border."

"Which means the career is over."

"Which means the career is on hold. The Refugee Travel Document —"

"I know about the RTD. It works. But it takes time." Cameron looked at Ilya. "And time is the thing you don't have."

"Have some time," Ilya said. "Season does not start for few months."

"A few months. And the Russian government knows your schedule as well as you do."

Silence.

Shane watched Cameron's face. The joviality was gone. What was left looked like calculation — the political math, the cost-benefit, the machinery of a man weighing how much capital he could spend.

Shane felt the floor tilt. This was where it ended. This was where Cameron McReady said something kind and noncommittal and they flew home with nothing.

"Here is what I can tell you," Cameron said. "And here is what I can't."

He leaned forward. "I can tell you that my government takes the persecution of LGBTQ individuals by foreign states seriously. I can tell you that what has happened to you — the shooting, the threatening call, the state media campaign — constitutes a pattern that my government recognizes and condemns. I can tell you that your citizenship application will be processed fairly and with the urgency the circumstances require."

"But," Shane said.

"But I am the Prime Minister. Not the Minister of Immigration. Not the IRB. I cannot instruct them to approve an application. I cannot fast-track a file by executive order. That's not how this works."

He paused. "And if I did it, it would undermine the integrity of every immigration decision this country makes. Your opponents would use it. The people screaming about agendas and special treatment would use it."

Shane felt the calculation shift. He'd been wrong. Cameron wasn't brushing them off. He was telling them the truth about the shape of the box he was in. That was different.

"What I *can* do," Cameron said, "is make sure the system knows that this government is watching. That the Minister is aware. That Global Affairs is engaged. That the RCMP's transnational repression unit has everything they need. I can make sure that when Melinda Sotto argues for expedited processing, the person reading that file understands the security context."

"That's not nothing," his dad said.

"It's not everything either." Cameron looked at Ilya. "I want to be straight with you. There are pressures. There will be members of the House who say I'm interfering."

"There are three opposition members who have been very loud about the idea that you and Shane have an agenda — Drupal, Mickelson, Bouvier. They'll use this."

"Let them," Yuna said.

"Yuna—"

"Let them. Ahmed Drupal represents a constituency that went sixty percent for your party in the last election. Mickelson hasn't won a

debate since 2019. And Bouvier's own caucus is embarrassed by him."

She set her coffee down. "They're noise, Cameron. You've handled worse noise."

Cameron looked at her for a long moment. Then he looked at Shane's dad.

"Did you marry her or did she annex you?"

"Both," his dad said.

Cameron sat back. Picked up the coffee. Drank it.

"You have my support," he said. "Personally and as Prime Minister. I will not make a public statement yet — the timing has to be right, and my team needs to coordinate with your people. But when the time comes, this government will be clear about where it stands."

"And where does it stand?" Ilya asked.

Cameron set the coffee down. Looked at him.

"You chose Canada. You married a Canadian. You built a hockey camp for kids who can't afford to play. You won the Stanley Cup wearing our maple leaf."

The blue eyes. The steady voice.

"And now a foreign government is trying to punish you for loving your husband. You are Canadian in every way that matters. The paperwork is just catching up."

Ilya's thumb pressed into the cross.

Nobody spoke for a moment. Edith, who had been standing at the counter the whole time, set down a pie.

"Eat," she said. "It's blueberry. I've got homemade vanilla ice cream."

The pie was extraordinary.

Shane sat at the Prime Minister's kitchen table and ate blueberry pie with ice cream and watched Ilya charm Cameron's grandchildren, who had come back downstairs with Anya and a collection of stuffed animals they wanted Ilya to meet. The girl — Isla — had decided Ilya was hers, and was sitting on his lap explaining the lineage of each stuffed animal with the seriousness of a genealogist.

The boy — Duncan — was showing Shane his hockey card collection, which included a Rozanov rookie card that Cameron had apparently given him.

"Signed," Duncan said, holding it up.

Shane looked at Ilya. "You signed a card for the Prime Minister's grandson?"

"I signed card for a fan," Ilya said. "Did not know at the time."

"He didn't," Cameron confirmed. "I sent it through David. Didn't want to make it a thing."

"You sent my dad to get an autograph?"

"I sent your father to get an autograph for my grandson. It's a perfectly reasonable request between friends."

Shane looked at his dad. His dad was eating pie. He did not look up.

Yuna and Edith were on the porch. Shane could see them through the window — two women in the Edmonton evening, talking in the way women talked when their children were inside and safe and the night was warm. Edith had her hand on Yuna's arm. Yuna was nodding.

"Sir," Shane said. The kitchen was quieter now. The kids were on the floor with Anya. Ilya was beside him. His dad across the table.

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

Cameron waved the thanks away. "Don't thank me. Thank your father. He's been covering for you since you were nineteen years old and too smart for your own good."

Shane looked at his dad.

His dad looked up from his pie. The reading glasses. The steady face. The man who had worked at the Treasury Board for thirty years and played hockey at McGill and went fishing every July with the Prime Minister and had never once mentioned any of it.

"You should have told me," Shane said.

"I'm telling you now," his dad said.

The guest room was on the second floor. Blue walls. A quilt that looked handmade. A framed photo of the McReady kids at some lake — teenagers, all limbs and sunburn.

There was a Centaurs pennant on the wall. Shane stared at it.

"The Prime Minister of Canada has a Centaurs pennant in his guest room," Shane said.

"Prime Minister is fan," Ilya said. He was sitting on the bed, unlacing his shoes. "You heard him."

"There's a pennant, Ilya. On the wall. Where guests sleep."

"Maybe it is new. Maybe Edith put it up today."

"That's worse."

Ilya pulled him down onto the bed. Anya was already at the foot of it, curled into a ball, apparently unbothered by the fact that she was sleeping in the Prime Minister's guest room. The girl — Isla — had cried when Anya had to go upstairs. Edith had promised she could see Anya in the morning.

Shane lay on his back. The ceiling was white. The house was quiet — the particular quiet of a house where the people in it had gone to bed trusting that the morning would come.

"I met Jeremy Tierney," Shane said. "When I was captain in Montreal. A reception after we won the Cup. He shook my hand. There was a photographer. The whole thing took ninety seconds."

"And?"

"And I'm lying in Cameron McReady's guest room wearing borrowed pajamas because my dad went fishing with him in 1998."

Ilya's chest moved. The almost-silent laugh.

"Your father is remarkable man," Ilya said.

"My father is a man who has been keeping secrets."

"Not secrets. He was keeping his life. People do not tell their children everything." A pause. "I didn't tell Alexei about you until he found out himself."

"That's different."

"Is it?"

Shane turned onto his side. Ilya's face in the dim room — the jaw, the stubble, the curls pressed flat from the plane. The hazel eyes, green in this light.

"Are you okay?" Shane asked.

"Am sleeping in Prime Minister's house. His granddaughter showed me seventeen stuffed animals and told me their life stories. His wife gave me pie. He called me national treasure." Ilya's hand found the cross. "I am not okay. I am — I don't know what I am."

"He meant it."

"I know he meant it. That is the part I don't know what to do with."

Shane put his hand on Ilya's chest. Over the cross. Over Ilya's hand.

"We have people," Shane said.

"We have people."

"That's something."

"That is everything."

Anya shifted at the foot of the bed. Somewhere in the house, a clock ticked. Outside, the Edmonton night — the wide sky, the flat city, the RCMP vehicles parked on the street.

Shane closed his eyes. He was in the Prime Minister's guest room. There was a Centaurs pennant on the wall. Downstairs, Edith had left the porch light on.

He woke to his phone.

Not the alarm — the notifications. The stream that had become the background noise of their lives, the constant feed of a crisis that never slept even when they did.

It was six AM. Edmonton light — different from Ottawa, flatter, wider, the sun coming in low through thin curtains. Ilya was still asleep, one

arm over Anya, his face pressed into the pillow. Shane reached for the phone.

Jinky: *INTERPOL UPDATE — Russia formally requested Red Notice on Ilya. Interpol Commission reviewing. Martin says it'll be rejected (political case, no dual criminality) but the REQUEST is the headline.*

Jinky: *Reuters has it. CNN has it. Everyone will have it in 30 min.*

Farrah: *Coordinating response. Do NOT comment. Statement from legal team only. Martin is drafting.*

Harris: *Reddit is a war zone. #TakeBackHockey trending again. But #StandWithRozanov is bigger.*

Harris: *Top Shelf did an episode tonight — and they're on OUR side. Fitz basically said "this has gone too far, this is about a man's life." First time they've broken from the anti-Hollanov line. Jinky is screaming.*

Jinky: *I AM NOT SCREAMING. I am strategically celebrating*.

Jinky: *Also Pussy Riot posted about Ilya. PUSSY RIOT. Their reach is insane. Russian state media will lose their minds.*

Farrah: *Two Hockey Chicks episode dropping tomorrow. Sammy and Trix are coordinating with us on timing. LGBTQ orgs across North America issuing joint statement — GLAAD, Egale, PFLAG, Lambda Legal. Forty-seven organizations. Harris has the list.*

Harris: *US coverage picking up. Washington Post running a feature tomorrow. ESPN doing a segment. Jake Tapper mentioned it on air last night.*

Then a different thread. Rupert.

Rupert: *Incident at residence. Three individuals attempted approach. Perimeter team engaged. Individuals fled. Vehicle plates recorded. Ottawa PD notified.*

Rupert: *No breach. No damage. Residence secure.*

Shane read it twice.

Three people had come to their house. Their house, where Anya's bed was by the radiator and the spice rack was organized by cuisine and the spreadsheet was on the laptop on the kitchen table.

Three people had come to their house while they were in Edmonton eating pie with the Prime Minister. Those three people had been turned away by Rupert's team and had driven off into the Ottawa night with license plates recorded and a police report pending.

He looked at Ilya. Ilya was asleep. His head pressed into the pillow, his curls a mess, his mouth slightly open. The cross glinted at his throat.

Shane thought about waking him. Decided against it. The information would be there in an hour. Let him have the hour.

He looked out the window. Edmonton in early morning. The wide sky already bright. The quiet street. The RCMP vehicle still there.

Somewhere out there, Drupal and Mickelson and Bouvier were writing their statements. Somewhere, Russian officials were filing paperwork with Interpol. Somewhere, Top Shelf was changing its tune and Pussy Riot was posting and forty-seven organizations were signing their names to a piece of paper that said *this man belongs here.*

Somewhere, three people had driven to his house in the dark.

Downstairs, he could hear someone humming in the kitchen. Coffee. The clink of mugs. The sound of a house waking up — the ordinary machinery of morning, happening in the Prime Minister's home the same way it happened in every home, the same way it happened in theirs.

The smell of coffee reached the second floor. Anya lifted her head. Her tail moved once.

Shane put the phone down. He'd tell Ilya over breakfast. He'd tell his parents. He'd call Rupert. He'd text Farrah.

The crisis would be there.

Right now, the Prime Minister's wife was making coffee and his husband was asleep and the dog was deciding whether the smell was worth leaving the bed for.

Anya decided it was. She jumped down and padded to the door and looked back at Shane.

"Yeah," Shane said. "Okay."

He followed the dog downstairs.

Ilya

Chapter 11: Ilya

Men come to the door. They bring documents and diplomatic plates and the particular look of a country that doesn't believe in borders. Rupert has something to say about that. So does a federal judge. And at 2 AM, in a dark kitchen with a warm beer, Ilya tells Shane about a trip his father took him on when he was nine.

The house smelled wrong when they got home.

Not wrong like danger — wrong like absence. The air had the flat quality of rooms that had been empty overnight. No coffee from this morning, no dog smell layered into the furniture, no trace of the two people who lived here. Just the air conditioner and the faint antiseptic scent of cleaning products — Shane's cleaning products, arranged under every sink, deployed on a schedule Ilya did not understand but had learned not to question.

Rupert's team had been through the house. Ilya could see it — not a mess, nothing disturbed, but the careful signs of a sweep. A chair angled differently. The curtain pulled an inch further than Shane left it. The small red light on the security panel that meant the system had been reset.

Three people had come to their door last night while they were in Edmonton. Rupert's people had turned them away. License plates recorded. Ottawa police notified. This was what safety looked like now — other people in your house, checking your rooms, making sure the place where you slept was still yours.

Anya bolted from the carrier and ran a circuit of the ground floor, checking her spots. The bed by the radiator. The corner of the

couch. Shane's office doorway, where she liked to lie across the threshold. She completed the circuit and sat down on Ilya's foot.

"Home," Ilya said to her. In Russian. *Doma*.

Jensen did his own circuit. Marie checked the back. Rupert was on the phone in the driveway, talking to someone in the clipped voice that meant he was coordinating and did not want to be interrupted.

Yuna was in the kitchen already, filling the kettle. Shane's father was setting down the bags. Shane was at the security panel, reading the log the way Shane read everything — completely, in order, missing nothing.

"System was reset at 11:47 PM," Shane said. "Armed again at 11:52. Five-minute window."

"Rupert's team," Jensen said from the hallway. "Standard after an approach."

Shane nodded. Typed something into his phone. Filed it somewhere — the spreadsheet, probably. Everything went into the spreadsheet.

It had been decided on the plane back from Edmonton. Jensen in the pool house — it had a bathroom, a sofa-bed, a line of sight to the front and side of the property. He was setting up his equipment there already, turning it into a command post. Marie in one of the guest rooms upstairs — the one at the back, with the window that looked over the yard and the lane. Shane's parents in the other guest room. Nobody had discussed how long this arrangement would last. Nobody needed to.

Ilya stood at the kitchen window. The street looked normal. The houses, the trees, the parked cars. Mrs. Ouellet across the street was watering her garden. A kid rode a bike on the sidewalk.

Somewhere on this street, last night, three people had come with intent.

"Ilya," Yuna said. "Sit."

He sat. She put tea in front of him. He wrapped his hands around the mug and did not drink it.

The next morning, two police officers came. Ottawa police — a constable and a sergeant, both professional, both careful with their language. They took the report about last night's approach. Three individuals in a vehicle, license plates recorded by Rupert's team, no contact made, no property damaged.

The sergeant — a woman named Constable Dufour — asked questions. Time of approach. Duration. Any identifying features. Rupert provided the footage. She watched it on his tablet, twice, made notes.

"We'll coordinate with the RCMP," Dufour said. "Given the diplomatic dimension."

"The RCMP transnational unit already has the file," Rupert said.

Dufour nodded. Nothing about her face suggested surprise. She'd been briefed before she came. She knew what this was.

They left. Shane walked them to the door. Ilya stayed in the kitchen and drank tea that had gone cold twenty minutes ago.

The day settled into something like routine. Yuna made calls. Shane's father read at the kitchen table — a real book, not his phone, because Shane's father read books the way other people breathed. Shane worked on the laptop, updating the spreadsheet, the file, the documentation of everything.

Ilya cooked. This was what Ilya did when his hands needed to move — he cooked. A kartoshka casserole, his mother's recipe. Potatoes sliced thin, layered with ground beef and shredded cabbage, onion browned until soft, the whole thing built in the heavy dish that had

survived two apartments and a move to Ottawa. Salt. Pepper. A pour of broth over the top. The layering took time — potato, meat, cabbage, potato, meat, cabbage — repetitive, methodical. Each layer pressed flat with his palm. Grounding.

Jensen came in from the pool house at noon. He'd been on calls all morning. The pool house had a folding table now, a laptop, two monitors that hadn't been there yesterday. Ilya had seen the cables running through the back door.

"Perimeter's clean," Jensen said. "I've got Rupert's team rotating on the street. New camera on the garage. Footage links to my station."

"Your station," Ilya said. "You are making command center out of pool house."

"It has good sight lines."

"It has inflatable flamingo."

"The flamingo has been redeployed."

Marie was upstairs. Ilya could hear her moving occasionally — the quiet footsteps, the murmur of a phone call. She'd set up her things in the guest room at the back, the one with Shane's old trophies on the shelf and the window overlooking the lane. She would come down for coffee, check the rear of the house, exchange three words with Jensen, and go back up. They operated like a machine — efficient, coordinated, almost invisible unless you were looking.

Ilya was always looking now.

The knock came at four.

Not Rupert's people. Not the police — the police had been and gone. This knock was different. Three sharp raps. Formal.

Jensen got to the door first. He looked through the side window. His body changed — not alarmed, but engaged. A shift in weight. His hand moved to his belt.

"Four men," Jensen said. Quiet. Directed at Rupert, who had come in from the pool house at the sound of the knock. "Suits. Dark sedan in the driveway. Diplomatic plates."

The kitchen went still.

"Diplomatic plates," Shane said.

"Russian consulate markings."

Ilya stood up. The mug was still in his hand. He set it on the counter. The sound of ceramic on granite was very loud.

"I will go," Ilya said.

"You will not go," Shane said.

"They are here for me."

"They are here for you and that is exactly why you will not go to the door alone." Shane was already moving, putting himself in front of Ilya, acting like a shield. "Mom. Call Melinda. Now."

Yuna had her phone out before Shane finished the sentence.

Marie came down the stairs. Fast, quiet. She positioned herself at the back hallway, phone already to her ear. Ilya heard her say, low and precise, "RCMP transnational repression unit, this is Marie Chalamet. We have a situation at the Rozanov-Hollander residence. Four Russian consular officials at the front door. Requesting immediate response."

A pause. Then: "Ottawa police as well. Yes. Both."

Rupert looked at Jensen. Jensen gave him a signal — four fingers, a tilt of the head toward the door.

"I'll handle initial contact," Rupert said. "Jensen, stay with Ilya. Marie, back stays covered. Nobody outside without my say."

"Rupert," Ilya said. "Let me see them."

Rupert looked at him. The shaved head, the gray beard, the eyes that had spent decades assessing situations like this one.

"You can see them," Rupert said. "From behind me. You do not speak first. You do not step outside. Understood?"

"Understood."

Rupert opened the door.

Four men. All in dark suits. The first was tall, thin, gray at the temples, carrying a leather portfolio. The second was shorter, broader, with a face that gave nothing. The third and fourth stood behind them — younger, bigger, positioned like they were used to standing behind people. Not security exactly. Presence. The kind of men you brought to make a doorway feel smaller.

"Good afternoon," the tall one said. English with heavy accent. "We are here on behalf of the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation. We wish to speak with Mr. Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov."

"I'm the head of Mr. Rozanov's security detail," Rupert said. "You can speak to me."

"Our business is with Mr. Rozanov."

"Your business is with me until I determine otherwise. What is the nature of your visit?"

The tall man opened the portfolio. Removed a document — heavy paper, official-looking, stamped and sealed. He held it toward

Rupert.

"We are authorized by the Russian Federation to inform Mr. Rozanov that he is required to present himself to the nearest Russian consular office for processing related to his ongoing legal matter under Article 6.21 of the Administrative Offenses Code." His eyes moved past Rupert. Found Ilya. "Mr. Rozanov is citizen of Russian Federation. He is subject to Russian law."

"Not on Canadian soil he isn't," Rupert said. He did not take the document.

"These are official documents from—"

"I don't care where they're from. Mr. Rozanov is a permanent resident of Canada. You have no authority to compel him to do anything. You are standing on private property without invitation." Rupert's voice had not risen. If anything, it had dropped. "I am going to ask you to leave. The RCMP and Ottawa police have been called. They are on their way."

Across the street, Mrs. Ouellet had stopped watering. She was standing on her lawn, hose dripping, watching. Two doors down, the Ludlows had come out onto their porch. The kid on the bicycle had stopped at the end of the block.

The street was watching.

The tall man looked at Ilya again. Past Rupert, through the doorway, directly at him. The look lasted three seconds. It was not threatening in the way a fist was threatening. It was threatening in the way a camera was threatening — it said *we see you, we know where you are, we can come back*.

"Mr. Rozanov," he said. "Your government requests your cooperation."

Ilya's hands were cold. His feet were on the floor. He could feel the hardwood through his socks, the solidity of the house, the house that was his, that he paid the mortgage on, in a country that wanted him.

"I am home," Ilya said. "You are not welcome in it."

The tall man's expression did not change. He placed the document on the porch railing. The other three had not spoken once.

"The consulate will be in contact," the tall man said.

"The consulate will be hearing from our attorneys," Rupert said. "Leave. Now."

They turned. Walked to the sedan. The tall man got in the passenger side. The shorter man drove. The two younger ones in the back. The car reversed out of the driveway. Slow. Deliberate. Making sure everyone on the street saw them leave on their own terms.

Jensen appeared beside Ilya. He'd been watching through the side window the entire time.

"There's a truck," Jensen said. Low. To Rupert, not to Ilya. "Gray pickup, two houses east. Been sitting there since before they arrived. One occupant. Male. Not consular — no plates match."

Rupert nodded. "Go."

Jensen went. Out the side door, down the yard, through the Hendricks' hedge gap — Ilya watched through the window as Jensen appeared on the sidewalk, walking toward the gray truck with the particular stride of a man who was not in a hurry and did not need to be. He reached the driver's side. Stood there.

Ilya could not hear what Jensen said. He did not need to hear it. The truck started. Pulled away. Jensen watched it go, took a photo of the plate with his phone, and walked back.

"Gone," Jensen said when he came in. "Ran the plate. Not diplomatic. Ontario registration. I've sent it to RCMP and Ottawa PD."

Rupert closed the front door. Locked it. Looked at Ilya.

"You okay?"

Ilya nodded. He was not okay. His hands were still cold.

The RCMP arrived first. Two officers from the transnational repression unit — a man and a woman, both in plainclothes, both carrying federal IDs. They introduced themselves as Sergeant Côté and Corporal Abiodun. They were calm. They were thorough. They had clearly been expecting this call.

Côté took Rupert's statement. Abiodun reviewed the security footage — the front door camera, Jensen's pool house monitors, the new camera on the garage. They watched the four men arrive. They watched the conversation. They watched the sedan leave.

"We'll be filing a diplomatic complaint through Global Affairs," Côté said. "Consular officials conducting this kind of direct approach to a permanent resident — this is outside the scope of consular function. It may constitute a violation of the Vienna Convention."

"Will anything happen?" Shane asked. His voice was flat. Controlled.

"The complaint creates a record. It escalates the file. And it gives your legal team ammunition."

Ottawa police arrived twenty minutes later. Two cruisers. Four officers. They took their own report, coordinated with Côté and Abiodun, spoke with Jensen about the gray truck. One of the officers walked the street — knocked on Mrs. Ouellet's door, spoke with the Ludlows. Witness statements. The neighborhood had seen.

Mrs. Ouellet came over after the police left. She brought a casserole dish. She was seventy-three and had lived on this street for forty years and she stood in their doorway and said, in French-accented English, "Those men had no business here. You tell me if they come back. My Gérard was RCMP for thirty years. I know what harassment looks like."

Ilya took the casserole. "Thank you, Mrs. Ouellet."

"You are a good neighbor, Ilya. You shovel my walk in winter. You don't have to do that."

"Yes I do."

She patted his arm. Looked past him at the hallway full of security personnel and police officers and Shane Hollander on the phone and Yuna Hollander at the kitchen table running what appeared to be a small war.

"That's a lot of people in your house," she said.

"Is popular house."

She smiled. Went home. Ilya closed the door and held the casserole and stood in the hallway for a moment, holding a glass dish full of something that smelled like chicken, surrounded by the apparatus of his own protection.

Melinda arrived in twenty minutes. Martin was with her — the briefcase, the rumpled blazer, the glasses. He came through the door already talking.

"Where's the document they left?"

"Porch railing," Rupert said. "I didn't touch it."

Martin put on gloves. Went outside. Came back with the paper in a clear sleeve.

"Theater," he said, reading it at the kitchen table. Everyone was in the kitchen — Shane, Ilya, Yuna, Shane's father, Rupert, Melinda, Jensen by the hallway, Marie by the window.

"Theater," Shane said.

"Official-looking. Stamped. But this is not an enforceable legal instrument under any Canadian jurisdiction. It is a request for voluntary compliance with a Russian administrative proceeding. It has no standing here. None."

"But they came to the house," Yuna said.

"They came to the house." Martin set the document down. Took off the glasses. Put them back on. "And that is the point. This is not about legal authority. This is about intimidation. Four men from the Russian consulate showing up at the private residence of a Canadian permanent resident to demand compliance with a foreign prosecution. On Canadian soil. In front of witnesses."

He looked around the table.

"This is a gift."

"A gift," Ilya said.

"They just committed an act of transnational repression on camera." He pointed at the security panel. "Your system records the front entrance. Mr. Fawcett, additional footage?"

"Three angles," Rupert said. "Already saved."

"And the RCMP?"

"Have been here. Took statements. Filing diplomatic complaint through Global Affairs."

"Good. This is exactly the kind of evidence that turns a strong citizenship application into an unassailable one. This is exactly the thing I needed to file an emergency restraining order and begin the asylum petition."

The kitchen was quiet.

"I need your green light," Martin said. He was looking at Ilya. Then at Shane. "Both of you. The restraining order goes to a federal court. I file against the Russian consulate for harassment of a permanent resident on Canadian soil. Separately, I file the refugee protection claim. The one we've been holding."

"The door," Ilya said.

"The door."

The door that closed Moscow. The door he'd talked about with Shane in the dark, in bed, with the cross between them. The one where maybe things change and he could see the city again — that door.

"If I file," Ilya said. "I cannot go back."

"You cannot go back now," Melinda said. Her voice was steady. "Ilya. Four men from the Russian government just came to your house. You couldn't go back before today. Today just made it official."

Ilya looked at Shane. The dark eyes. The freckles across his nose and cheekbones. The face that was still. Not calculating — decided. Waiting for Ilya to arrive.

"File," Ilya said.

"Both?" Martin asked.

"Both. Restraining order. Asylum."

Shane's hand found the back of Ilya's neck. Stayed.

Martin nodded. Opened the briefcase. Began.

The restraining order was granted in forty-eight hours.

A federal court judge — the Honourable Justice Claire Boudreau — reviewed Martin's filing, the security footage, the document left on the porch, the RCMP's preliminary report, and the pattern of escalation dating back to the shooting. She issued a temporary restraining order barring representatives of the Russian Federation from making contact with Ilya Rozanov or Shane Hollander, approaching their residence, their workplace, or the Game Changers Hockey Camp facility.

Martin said it was the first restraining order in Canadian history issued against a foreign consulate on behalf of a permanent resident.

It made the news. Everything made the news now.

CBC ran it at the top of the hour. CTV had a panel — four talking heads, two of whom said this was an appropriate judicial response to foreign intimidation, one of whom said it was a provocation that would damage Canada-Russia relations, and one of whom said she didn't understand why a hockey player was getting special treatment. The special-treatment woman got destroyed on social media within the hour. Jinky's work, probably. Jinky didn't sleep.

The Globe and Mail ran an editorial: A LINE DRAWN. The *National Post* ran an op-ed asking whether the restraining order went too far. The *Toronto Star* ran a feature on transnational repression in Canada — Ilya's case as the lead example, followed by nine others. Journalists. Activists. Dissidents. People who had experienced the same harassment without the protection of a security team and a federal court order.

Drupal called it "judicial overreach." Mickelson called it "a political stunt." Bouvier said something in French that Ilya understood

perfectly and wished he did not.

The Two Hockey Chicks episode dropped the same day.

Episode 39: "Don't Let Them Make You Small." Sammy's basement. Borje on the mixing board. The conversation about the pass, the goal, the trust. The part about Russian state television — *they crop it, Shane is not in the frame*. The question about what they wanted people to do. *Watch hockey. Come to games. Bring your kids.*

It went everywhere. Downloaded 1.4 million times in the first week. Sammy texted Ilya a photo of herself crying, captioned *this is your fault.* Trix texted separately: *Borje is famous. He doesn't care. He has never cared about anything.*

The support came in waves. GLAAD's statement. Egale Canada's open letter. PFLAG chapters across three provinces organizing watch parties for the upcoming season. Lambda Legal offering pro bono consultation. The NHL Players' Association issued a statement — careful, measured, but clear: the safety of their members and their families was non-negotiable.

Top Shelf released a new episode. Fitz opened it with something Ilya did not expect.

"These guys won the Stanley Cup a month ago. A month. They should be on a beach somewhere with the Cup, drinking out of it, doing the stupid things Cup winners do. Instead they've got Russian government officials showing up at their house. Instead they've got death threats and restraining orders. These are two of the best hockey players in the history of the game and they can't buy groceries without getting shot at." A pause. "We've been asking questions on this show. Some of those questions were the right ones. Some of them weren't. What's happening to Ilya Rozanov is not a hockey question. It's a human question. And the answer is this has gone too far." Brewer agreed. For the first time in months, Top Shelf and Two Hockey Chicks were on the same page.

#TakeBackHockey didn't stop. It got louder — the restraining order gave them fuel, proof of the "special treatment" they'd been screaming about. The Reddit threads multiplied. But #StandWithRozanov was bigger now. The ratio had shifted. The people who wanted Ilya gone were still shouting. The people who wanted him to stay were organizing.

Harris sent a chart. Jinky sent seventeen fire emojis and a voice note that was just them screaming for nine seconds.

Camp ended on a Saturday.

The last day — the final scrimmage, parents in the stands, kids in borrowed gear. Two weeks. That was what camp was. Two weeks of early mornings and borrowed skates and children who did not know that the man teaching them to stop without falling was the subject of an international legal crisis.

Ilya stood at the boards and watched twenty-eight kids play hockey. Maren — thirteen, the girl who'd spent the first day gripping the boards, too afraid to let go — scored the last goal of the scrimmage. She looked at Ilya through the glass.

He raised his fist. She raised hers.

Hayden handled the closing ceremony. Craig took photos. The parents shook hands and loaded equipment into minivans and drove away with their children, and the rink went quiet.

Training camp in six weeks.

If Russia hadn't pulled his passport by then, he could play. If they had, he could not leave the country. He would be a captain who could not travel to half his games.

Martin said the citizenship application was moving. Melinda said the expedited argument was strong. Cameron McReady — the Prime

Minister in his cardigan, in his kitchen — had said the system would know his government was watching.

But systems took time. And Russia did not wait for systems.

He woke at 2:14 AM.

Not from a dream — from the absence of sleep. The kind of waking where the body decides it is finished pretending and deposits you into the dark. One moment nothing. The next, the ceiling.

Shane was asleep. The dark hair on the pillow. The steady breathing. Anya was between them, curled in the bend of Shane's knees.

Ilya got up. Went downstairs. The house was dark except for the security panel's green light and the faint glow from the streetlamp through the kitchen window. Outside, through the back, a light in the pool house — Jensen, still awake. Upstairs, Marie in the back guest room. Shane's parents in the other.

A house full of people keeping him safe. A house that used to be just his.

He opened the fridge for water. Stood there. The cold light on his face, the cold air on his skin.

He reached past the water and took a beer. Opened it. Drank half standing at the counter in the dark.

He took a second. Opened that too. Drank it faster than the first. He was not a man who drank at 2 AM. He was not a man who stood in dark kitchens. He was Ilya Rozanov and he slept well and he charmed rooms and he did not let things get to him because getting to him was a luxury he had not been allowed since he was nine years old.

He heard Shane on the stairs before he saw him. The specific sound of Shane's feet — light, precise, even at 2 AM. Shane appeared in the kitchen doorway wearing boxers and one of Ilya's t-shirts, which hung off his shoulder.

"Hey," Shane said.

"Go back to sleep."

"You're drinking beer at two in the morning."

"Is good beer."

Shane came into the kitchen. Did not turn on the light. Sat on the stool across the counter from Ilya. His dark eyes adjusted to the dim.

Ilya finished the second beer. His fingers were on the cap of a third before Shane put his hand over Ilya's.

"Talk to me," Shane said.

"Am fine."

"You're not fine."

"Am fine in the way I am always fine, which is performance, and we both know this, and usually you let me do it."

Shane was quiet. His hand still on Ilya's.

"My father," Ilya said.

Shane waited.

"My father was police. High up. Connected. The kind of man who knew people and people did not say no to." He set the beer down. "When I was nine, he took me somewhere."

The kitchen. The dark. The green light.

"Not camp like summer camp. Not hockey camp. Labor camp. For people the state had decided were not useful. Criminals, some. Addicts. Men who could not hold jobs or would not hold jobs or had said wrong thing to wrong person. Men who did not — " He searched for the word. "Contribute. Men who Russia decided were not contributing."

He picked at the label on the bottle.

"He drove me there. Two hours outside Moscow. He walked me through gate and he showed me the men. Working. In the cold. In lines." He stopped. "I was nine, Shane. I did not understand what I was seeing. I understood the men were afraid and my father was not, and that my father wanted me to see what happened to people who did not behave."

Shane had not moved.

"He said — I remember exact words. He said, *This is where Russia puts men who forget what they owe.* And then he drove me home and we had dinner and he never said a word about it again."

The beer was warming in his hand. He did not drink it.

"I never forgot. It was in me. Every time I played hockey, every time I stood on the ice and the anthem played and the flag was there — I thought about those men. Working. In lines. And I smiled and I played and I was the best because being the best was the only way out of the line."

His voice had dropped. Barely above the hum of the fridge.

"When those men were on porch today. The suits. The documents. The way the tall one looked at me — past Rupert, past everyone, at me, like I was already theirs." His hands were cold again. They had not been warm since four o'clock. "I was nine. Standing at gate. My father behind me. Russia in front of me. No place to go."

Shane reached across the counter. His hand on Ilya's wrist. Not pulling. There.

"I am scared," Ilya said. "I do not say this. I perform not-scared very well. You know this. Everyone knows. Ilya Rozanov, he is never scared, he makes joke, he charms room." He looked at Shane. "I am scared. They came to our house. They know where we live. They left document on our porch like — like we are in Moscow. Like Canada is detail they have not dealt with yet."

Shane came around the counter. Stood in front of Ilya. Put his hands on Ilya's face. Palms warm. Fingers at his temples.

"Look at me," Shane said.

Ilya looked. The dark eyes in the dark kitchen.

"Canada is not a detail. Canada is the whole thing. You are permanent resident. You have restraining order issued by federal judge. You have asylum petition filed by one of best human rights lawyers in country. You have the RCMP. You have Global Affairs. You have the Prime Minister in his cardigan."

"You are listing things."

"I list things. That's what I do." Shane's thumbs moved across Ilya's cheekbones. "And you have me. And I have a spreadsheet."

Ilya closed his eyes. The hands on his face. The cold starting to thaw.

"My father took me to that place to make me afraid of Russia," Ilya said. "Twenty-four years later. Still works."

"Your father is dead," Shane said. "And you are here."

"Yes."

"And those men are gone."

"Yes."

"And tomorrow Martin's filing is public and the whole world knows Ilya Rozanov chose Canada and Canada chose him back."

Ilya pressed his forehead to Shane's. The cross between them. The dark kitchen. The green light on the panel. Anya's tags jingling on the stairs — she had followed Shane down, because Anya always followed Shane, and now she was at Ilya's feet, pressing her weight against his ankle the way she did when the thunder came.

"Okay," Ilya said.

"Okay."

"Am going to finish this beer."

"Okay."

"And then bed."

"Okay."

"Stop saying okay."

"Okay."

Ilya laughed. It was small and rough and it came from the place below the fear and the cold and the memory of the gate and the men in lines. But it was his.

Shane didn't move. Hands on Ilya's face. Waiting. The way Shane waited — not impatiently, not performing patience. Present. Standing in dark kitchen at 2 AM in Ilya's t-shirt with the dog at their feet and the whole country asleep outside.

Ilya finished the beer. Set the bottle on the counter.

"Bed," he said.

"Bed."

They went upstairs. Anya first, then Shane, then Ilya. The house was still dark. The panel still green. Jensen still in the pool house. Marie still in the back room. Shane's parents in the guest room, asleep or awake, holding the line the way parents held lines — silently, completely, without being asked.

The asylum petition was filed. The restraining order was holding. The door had closed on Moscow.

Ilya got into bed. Shane got in beside him. Anya settled between them, in the bend.

He pressed his thumb into the cross. The metal warm from his skin.

Six weeks until training camp. The claim was in. The team was forming — not just the hockey team but the other one, the one made of lawyers and parents and podcasters and forty-seven organizations and a thirteen-year-old girl who had scored a goal.

And Shane. The steady hands. The spreadsheet. The dark eyes in the dark.

Ilya closed his eyes. Sleep came eventually. Thin and fragile and it would not last.

But it came.

Shane

Chapter 12: Shane

The shooter has a name. The world has opinions. And the house on their quiet Ottawa street keeps filling with people who refuse to leave.

The shooter had a name.

Anton Lavrov. Thirty-eight. Russian ex-pat, ex-special forces. Married to a Canadian woman. Living in Mississauga for six years. Two kids in the Peel District schools. A house with a driveway and a recycling bin and a life that looked, from the outside, like the life of a man who had left Russia behind.

He hadn't.

The call came from Melinda, Tuesday morning. Shane was at the kitchen table with his laptop and his third coffee. Ilya was still asleep. Jensen was in the pool house. Marie was upstairs. His parents were in the other guest room — his mother already awake, he could hear the murmur of her phone voice through the floor.

"They got him," Melinda said. "RCMP arrested him yesterday afternoon."

Shane closed the laptop.

"Who turned him in?"

"His wife's brother. Canadian. He went to the RCMP because Lavrov's been — the word he used was *militant*. Increasingly radical. Talking about moving the whole family to Russia. The brother's afraid for his sister and the kids."

"Has Lavrov talked?"

"Not a word. Stone-cold. The RCMP says he asked for a lawyer and then stopped speaking. Hasn't said a single syllable since."

Shane looked at the window. The street. The morning. Jensen's pool house with the light on.

"Ex-special forces," Melinda said. "Russian military. He takes contract work — the kind that doesn't get filed with the CRA. The RCMP is working the connections but without his cooperation, it's circumstantial."

"Can they hold him?"

"Three shots at two people in a parking lot. They can hold him."

Shane told Ilya over breakfast. Ilya was eating yogurt, standing at the counter the way he always ate breakfast — standing, one hip against the granite, like sitting down for breakfast was a commitment he wasn't prepared to make.

"Anton Lavrov," Ilya said.

"Yes."

"Russian special forces."

"Former."

Ilya set the spoon down. His hand went to the cross. The thumb press.

"His wife's brother turned him in," Shane said. "Lavrov won't talk."

"He won't talk because he is professional. Professionals do not talk."

Shane didn't argue. Ilya knew things about Russia that Shane could read about but not feel — the weight of a system that produced men

like Lavrov, men who left the country but not the machine.

"Martin wants to add it to the file," Shane said. "The arrest, the military background, the connection pattern. He says it strengthens the asylum case."

"Everything strengthens the asylum case. That is the terrible thing." Ilya picked the spoon back up. "Every bad thing that happens to us is good for the file."

The days had a shape now.

Not the shape of a season — the rhythm of games and practices and travel that had been the architecture of their lives for fifteen years. A different shape. Smaller. Domestic. The shape of two people staying home because staying home was the safest thing they could do.

Ilya cooked. He cooked the way other people paced — not for pleasure but because his hands needed to be in motion. The kartoshka casserole appeared twice in one week. A pot of borscht that lasted three days. Pelmeni from scratch, the dough rolled thin on the counter, the kitchen dusted with flour.

Shane worked. The laptop. The spreadsheet. The file that had grown from a folder called MISC-2024 into something that looked like a legal brief. Every threat, every media mention, every data point cataloged and timestamped and cross-referenced.

They slept late. They went to bed early. They watched *Île de l'amour* and Shane translated and Ilya provided commentary and Anya slept between them on the couch, her head on Ilya's thigh, her back feet on Shane's lap.

Jensen ran the pool house command post. Two monitors, a laptop, a folding table, cables through the back door. The inflatable flamingo had been relocated to the garage. Jensen checked in twice a day — perimeter updates, camera feeds, coordination with Rupert's team.

Marie worked upstairs. She came down for coffee, checked the back, exchanged a sentence with Jensen, and went up again.

His parents stayed. His father read at the kitchen table — real books, thick ones, the kind that came from the library on Laurier Avenue. His mother ran the world from the guest room — phone calls, emails, the Irina Foundation, Shane's sponsorship portfolio, Ilya's media requests. She had banned Shane and Ilya from listening to podcasts.

"You will rot your brains," she said. "I will tell you what you need to know."

"Mom—"

"The answer is no."

She was right. Shane knew she was right. The podcasts were a sinkhole — the comments, the takes, the endless cycle of people who had opinions about their lives without living them. But the information came anyway, because Jinky and Farrah did not respect Yuna's ban.

They came on Thursday. Jinky in the doorway first — Monster Energy, phone in one hand, tablet in the other, the particular energy of a person who had slept three hours and considered this sufficient.

"Before you say anything," Jinky said, "your mom told me not to come."

"And yet," Shane said. "Here you are."

"She also told me the podcast ban was total. I respect your mom. I also have a job." They set the tablet on the kitchen table. Farrah came in behind them — calmer, sharper, a leather bag over one shoulder.

"We have updates," Farrah said. "Some you'll want. Some you won't."

Jensen appeared at the hallway entrance. Not blocking — present. He looked at Farrah, looked at Jinky, and went back to the pool house.

"He's hot-adjacent," Jinky said. "In a Terminator way."

"He's working," Shane said.

They sat at the table. Shane's mother came downstairs, saw Jinky, and gave them a look that would have ended most careers.

"I brought you coffee," Jinky said.

"That is not an apology."

"It's lavender latte with oat milk and honey."

Yuna took it.

Farrah opened her laptop. "The Lavrov arrest is the top story on every Canadian outlet and half the American ones. Martin's office released a statement — carefully worded, doesn't speculate on government connections but lays out the military background. Reuters picked it up. So did AP."

"Public response?"

"Overwhelmingly sympathetic. The brother-in-law detail is — people understand that. A man afraid for his sister. The human angle is doing more than any legal filing."

"What else?"

Jinky swiped through the tablet. "Russia declared Ilya an enemy of the state."

The kitchen went quiet.

"When?" Shane asked.

"Overnight. State television. Full segment, prime time. The language is враг *государства* — enemy of the state. Not the informal kind from the op-eds. Official classification. It changes the legal status of anyone who assists him inside Russia."

Shane looked at the stairs. Ilya was still up there. In the shower. Not hearing this yet.

"What does that mean for Alexei?" Shane asked.

Jinky's face changed. The manic energy dimmed. "It means Alexei's brother is now formally classified as an enemy. For a police officer in Moscow — we don't know. Martin's looking into it."

His mother set the coffee down. "I'll call Martin."

"Mom—"

"I'll call Martin." She was already moving.

Farrah continued. "The NHL issued a statement. Commissioner Villeneuve-Trudeau. Do you want to read it or hear it?"

"Hear it."

Farrah read from her phone. The statement was clear. The league stood by Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander. Unequivocally. The shooting, the threats, the harassment — unacceptable. The league would cooperate with law enforcement. The league would ensure Ilya and Shane could play safely. First names used throughout.

"One hundred percent," Farrah said. "Those are the words. 'The NHL stands behind Ilya and Shane one hundred percent.'"

"Villeneuve-Trudeau is good," Shane said.

"Villeneuve-Trudeau is excellent," Farrah said. "She also called me directly. She wants to coordinate on security for the season."

"If there is a season," Shane said. "If Ilya still has a passport."

Nobody answered that.

Jinky pulled up another screen. "The Hockey Queens Legion."

"The what?"

"My army." Jinky's grin came back. "I've been building this since June. Online coalition — fans, activists, hockey parents, queer organizations. The name started as a joke and now it's got thirty-two thousand members across four platforms. We've been running counter-campaigns against #TakeBackHockey. Flagging harassment. Boosting positive coverage. Organizing arena support for the season."

"Thirty-two thousand," Shane said.

"And growing. We picked up six thousand this week after the Lavrov arrest. The Two Hockey Chicks episode is still moving — 2.1 million downloads now. Sammy did a follow-up reaction video and cried again. Her audience loves it when she cries."

"Everyone loves it when Sammy cries," Farrah said. "It's extremely effective."

"Also," Jinky said, "something happened on *Real Hockey*."

Shane knew the name. *Real Hockey* was the fringe — anonymous minor league players running a far-right podcast, the kind of content that lived in the corners of the internet where #TakeBackHockey recruited.

"One of their hosts quit. On air. His name is Justin Rickles — minor league coach, turns out. He outed himself by quitting. Said —" Jinky found the clip. Played it.

A voice, mid-thirties maybe, through tinny podcast audio: *"No. I'm done. I sat here and I listened to you guys float conspiracy theories about a man who got shot at and I'm — no. This shit ain't hockey, man. It's just ignorance and hatred. I'm out."*

Silence on the recording. Then the other two hosts scrambling.

"The clip's been viewed four million times," Jinky said. "Justin Rickles is a folk hero. He's getting coaching offers. ESPN wants an interview."

Shane stared at the table. A minor league coach nobody had heard of forty-eight hours ago, saying the thing that needed to be said, on a podcast that didn't deserve the audience it had.

"Add him to the file," Shane said.

"Already done," Jinky said.

Troy and Harris came on Saturday.

Not for a reason. Not with an agenda. They came because they were Troy and Harris and that was what they did — they showed up. Troy brought Thai food from the place on Bank Street. Harris brought beer and a three-ring binder.

"What's the binder?" Shane asked.

"Season prep," Harris said. "Media strategy for training camp. I've been working with Farrah."

"It's August."

"Training camp is in five weeks. The media circus will be — I want us ready."

Harris set the binder on the counter and opened a beer and started talking about podium strategy and locker room access and

credentialing policy. He'd tabbed the sections with color-coded flags. He had a timeline. He had contingencies for the contingencies.

Troy was on the couch with Ilya. Shane could see them through the kitchen doorway — Troy sitting the way Troy sat, compact and still, one leg crossed over the other. Ilya sprawled. Anya between them. They weren't talking much. Troy was on his phone. Ilya was watching something on his tablet with the volume low.

That was what Troy did. He didn't fill silence. He didn't perform comfort. He sat in the room and was present and let the other person decide how much of that presence to use.

"Hey," Troy said after a while. Shane heard it from the kitchen.

"Hm," Ilya said.

"You good?"

"Am on couch with dog and friend. Am good."

"Good."

That was it. That was the whole conversation. Shane watched Troy put his phone down and close his eyes and Ilya not react at all, and he thought Troy looked settled. Calm, even. Composed and centered, a man who'd figured out how to be still.

Later, in the kitchen, Harris said quietly, "He hasn't slept in four days."

Shane looked through the doorway. Troy on the couch, eyes closed, Anya's head on his knee.

Hayden and Jackie came on Sunday.

Hayden was loud. He came through the door with a twelve-pack and a bag of shawarma and his voice hit the hallway before his body did.

"Hollander. Rozanov. I have food and I have opinions."

"We don't need your opinions," Shane said.

"You never need my opinions. You always get them."

Jackie hugged Ilya. She was one of the few people who could hug Ilya without it looking like a child hugging a lamppost — she'd been doing it for years, she knew where to stand, she went straight for the midsection and held on.

"How are the kids?" Ilya asked.

"Jade is learning guitar. Ruby asked for noise-cancelling headphones. Arthur found a rock he thinks is an arrowhead. Amber drew you a picture."

She produced it from her bag. A crayon drawing — a tall figure with brown curly hair standing on what appeared to be ice, next to a shorter figure with black hair and dark spots on its face.

"The spots are freckles," Jackie said. "She was very clear about that."

Ilya held the drawing. Looked at it for a long time.

"Tell Amber thank you," he said.

"Tell her yourself. She wants a FaceTime."

Hayden was in the kitchen, already opening the shawarma. "I talked to J.J.," he said.

Shane stopped.

"Boiziau?" Shane said.

"How many J.J.s do you know?" Hayden unwrapped a pita. "He called me. He wants to call you. He's been wanting to call you for

weeks but J.J.'s thing is he never knows if he's welcome, because J.J. still carries the Montreal guilt even though I keep telling him—"

"He can call me."

Hayden looked up. "Yeah?"

"He can call me, Hayden."

"Good. Because he's been watching everything and he said — he said he's sick about it. He said, and I quote, 'Tell Holly I should have been louder.' In French, obviously. Everything's more dramatic in French."

Shane sat down. J.J. Boiziau, six-foot-six, Haitian-Canadian, the man who'd stood next to Shane in the Montreal locker room for eleven years. Who'd come to his wedding — one of only two Voyageurs who had. Who'd been hurt that Shane had told Hayden first. Who'd accused Shane of tripping on purpose in that playoff game and then, two days later, called to say he didn't believe it.

"Comeau reached out too," Hayden said, quieter now. "Sent a text. Just — 'Tell Shane we're with him.' That's it."

Gilbert Comeau. The Gladiator tattoo. The French they spoke in the corners of the locker room.

"Just Comeau?" Shane asked.

Hayden chewed. Set the pita down. "Just Comeau. So far."

Two. Out of twenty-two men who'd been his teammates. Two who reached out, three years later, when the world was watching.

Shane did the math. He always did the math.

"That's enough," Shane said. And meant it.

Martin came on Wednesday.

He'd been coming weekly now — the briefcase, the blazer, the Osgoode Law t-shirt underneath, the glasses he cleaned on his shirttail. He sat at the kitchen table and uncapped his pen with his teeth and drew on his legal pad while he talked.

The whole household gathered. Shane, Ilya, his parents. Jensen in the hallway. Marie at the back window. Melinda on speakerphone.

"Three updates," Martin said. "Two good, one complicated."

"Good first," Yuna said.

"The Lavrov arrest has materially strengthened the asylum file. Ex-military, contract history, the shooting itself — this is the kind of evidence that transforms an already strong claim into an exceptional one. I've updated the refugee protection filing. The IRB will not be able to ignore this."

"Second?"

"The restraining order is holding. Russian consulate has not attempted contact since Justice Boudreau's order. Their lawyers filed a procedural objection — standard, expected, performative. It'll be dismissed. More importantly, the diplomatic complaint through Global Affairs is generating its own pressure. I'm hearing from contacts at Foreign Affairs that the Russian ambassador has been called in twice."

"That's unusual," his father said.

"That's very unusual. It means Ottawa is taking the transnational repression framing seriously at the ministerial level."

"And the complicated one," Shane said.

Martin took off his glasses. Put them back on. The thing he did when the next sentence was going to be heavier than the last.

"The enemy-of-the-state designation changes the asylum calculus. In our favor, legally — it's the strongest possible evidence of state persecution. But it also raises the stakes for everyone connected to Ilya inside Russia."

The room understood. Nobody said Alexei's name.

"I've consulted with colleagues who specialize in Russian law. The designation means anyone who provides material assistance to Ilya — financial, logistical, even informational — could face prosecution under Russia's expanded treason statutes."

"Alexei is a police officer," Ilya said. His voice was flat.

"I know."

"He has a wife. A daughter."

"I know. And I want to be clear — there's nothing in the filing that references Alexei by name. Nothing in any public document. But the Russian state doesn't need public documents. They know who your family is."

Ilya's hands were on the table. Still. Not moving to the cross. Not moving anywhere.

"The citizenship application," Shane said. Steering it back.

"Moving," Melinda's voice came through the speaker. "The expedited argument is strong and getting stronger. Every incident adds weight. The Lavrov arrest, the consular approach, the enemy designation — I've amended the submission three times this month. The file is now one of the most well-documented humanitarian cases IRCC has ever received."

"Timeline?" Shane asked.

"I argued for six months. I'm hearing — *unofficially*, and I want to stress that — that the Minister's office is aware. McReady's doing

what McReady does. The system is moving faster than normal."

"How fast?"

Melinda paused. Shane could hear her choosing words.

"If nothing else goes wrong — and I realize that's a significant *if* — I think we could see a decision before Christmas."

Christmas. Four months. Ilya would be Canadian by Christmas, or he would be stateless and grounded and unable to play half his games and his brother would be at risk in Moscow and the door would be open or closed or both.

"What do you need from us?" Shane asked.

"Keep documenting. Keep being visible. The public dimension matters — the more Canadians who know this story, the harder it is for any part of the system to slow-walk it." Martin capped his pen. "And stay safe. The asylum case is strong. The citizenship case is strong. The legal architecture is holding. What I cannot protect you from is the next Anton Lavrov."

The kitchen was quiet.

"Training camp is in five weeks," Ilya said.

"I know."

"If Russia pulls my passport before the citizenship—"

"We file the emergency motion. RTD within seventy-two hours. You play."

"You are sure?"

"I am sure of the law. The law says you play." Martin put his glasses back on. "Whether Russia decides to test the law before October — that, I cannot predict."

Ilya looked at Shane. The hazel eyes. The jaw. The stubble.

"We will be ready," Ilya said.

Martin nodded. Stood. Picked up the briefcase.

"One more thing," he said. He was looking at Ilya. "The enemy-of-the-state designation. I know what that means to you. I know what it costs."

He paused. The Clark Kent glasses. The kind face.

"In twelve years of practice, it is the single most powerful piece of evidence I have ever had in an asylum case. Russia just told the world, on state television, that Ilya Rozanov is their enemy because he married a man. There is no judge in this country who will read that and hesitate."

He shook Ilya's hand. Shane's. Held Yuna's a beat longer — the way he always did.

He left. Melinda hung up.

The kitchen settled. Jensen reappeared, took a glass of water, went back to the pool house. Marie came down, checked the back door, went up. The machinery of safety, turning.

Shane opened his laptop. Updated the spreadsheet. Added the Lavrov details, the enemy designation, the citizenship timeline. Christmas. Four months.

Ilya was at the window. Looking at the street. Mrs. Ouellet was out again, watering.

"Ilya," Shane said.

"Hm."

"J.J. Boiziau wants to call you."

Ilya turned from the window. The lopsided smile — the real one, small, surprised.

"Boiziau," Ilya said. "The giant."

"The giant."

"He punched me once."

"On ice. After you tripped me."

"Was accident." His cheeks reddened and he ducked his head. "Tell J.J. he can call."

Shane texted Hayden. *Tell J.J. he can call us both.*

Hayden's reply was instant: *J.J. says tonight. He's going to cry. I'm warning you now. J.J. is a crier.*

Shane put the phone down.

Anya had been on the couch for most of the afternoon, working through a rawhide bone with the focus of a surgeon. She'd given up now and was carrying it around the house, looking for a place to bury it. She tried under the couch cushion. She tried behind Jensen's boots by the back door. She tried the gap between the fridge and the wall, got stuck, and backed out with her ears flat and the bone still in her mouth.

She brought it to Ilya. Set it on his foot. Looked up. He picked it up and put it on the windowsill and she stared at it with the particular betrayal of a dog who had entrusted someone with something precious.

"Mrs. Ouellet is overwatering," Ilya said.

"She always overwaters."

"Should tell her."

"You tell her. She likes you."

"She likes that I shovel."

They stood there. The window. The street. The August light making everything look simpler than it was.

Anya rolled off the couch. Not gracefully — she went sideways, hit the floor with a thump, and stood up as if she'd meant to do that. She padded over and sat on Shane's foot. Then changed her mind and sat on Ilya's foot. Then lay down across both.

"She cannot decide," Ilya said.

"She never decides."

"Like her fathers."

Outside, a car passed. Jensen's shadow crossed the pool house window. Marie's footsteps above them, crossing to the back bedroom.

The house doing what the house did now. Holding.

Five weeks until training camp. Four months until Christmas. The shooter was in custody. A minor league coach had said the thing that needed to be said. And tonight, J.J. Boiziau was going to call.

The house was full of people. It had been full for weeks — security and parents and lawyers and friends who brought shawarma and binders and crayon drawings. It was not the house it had been in June, when the biggest problem was an eighteen-month timeline and a spreadsheet with too many columns.

It was louder. It was more crowded. It was harder to find a room where nobody was working or watching or quietly holding a line.

It was still theirs.

Anya sighed. The long, full-body sigh of a dog who had found a position she liked and intended to make it everyone else's problem.

"We should eat," Ilya said.

"We ate two hours ago."

"Should eat again. Am stressed. Stressed people eat."

"You're not stressed. You're bored."

"Am stressed and bored. Both. Very difficult combination."

Shane put his hand on Ilya's back. Low. Where no one could see it even though no one was looking.

"I'll make something," Shane said.

"You cannot cook."

"I can make eggs."

"You make terrible eggs."

"I make adequate eggs."

"You make eggs that are a crime against eggs."

"I'm making eggs."

He moved toward the kitchen. Anya followed. Anya always followed when food was possible — her loyalty to Ilya was deep and abiding and lasted exactly until someone opened the fridge. Ilya stayed at the window for another moment — the street, the light, the garden — and then followed too.

Ilya

Chapter 13: Ilya

His mother's recipe never comes out exactly right. A phone call from Montreal arrives years late. Russian state television says his name like a diagnosis. And at two in the morning, by a pool he can't sleep next to without swimming, he tells Shane the thing he's been trying not to say.

Training camp starts on a Monday.

Ilya made syrniki on a Wednesday morning when the house smelled like stale coffee and the August heat had already settled against the windows like a hand.

Tvorog through the sieve. Egg. Flour. A little sugar. His mother used to make them on Saturdays in the apartment in Moscow, standing at the counter in the blue robe that smelled like cigarettes and hand cream, her wrist turning the fork through the mixture in a rhythm Ilya could still hear if the kitchen was quiet enough. He'd learned the recipe not from her but from reconstruction — years later, alone in his first apartment in Boston, standing over a bowl of wrong-textured tvorog that he'd bought at a Russian grocery in Brookline, trying to get the taste right. He'd gotten close. You couldn't get exact with a dead woman's recipe. You could get close enough that the distance hurt, and that was its own burden.

He shaped the rounds. Pressed them flat with his palm. The oil in the pan was too hot — he turned it down, waited, tried again. His mother never waited. She put them in too hot and they came out dark on one side and pale on the other, and she served them anyway with a shrug that said this was not the part of life she was going to be careful about.

Anya was at his feet. She had arrived at the sound of the oil — not the cooking, the oil itself, the initial pour from the bottle, which Anya had apparently memorized as the opening note of a symphony that ended with food on the floor. She sat with her ears forward and her eyes tracking his hands with a focus she never applied to commands, recall, or basic self-preservation.

"You are not getting syrniki," he told her in Russian. "You ate a sock yesterday. Your judgment is under review."

Her tail thumped once against the tile.

"Also, I know about the shoe. David's shoe. Under the couch. I have not told David. This is between us."

Thump.

He flipped the first batch. Golden on the bottom, the edges crisped. Close. Not exact.

Shane came in. He'd been in the living room for an hour — the laptop, the spreadsheet, the quiet industry of a man whose hands needed a task the way Ilya's hands needed dough. He stopped in the kitchen doorway and the smell hit him; Ilya watched his nostrils move.

"Syrniki?"

"Yes."

"It's eleven in the morning."

"Syrniki do not need a time."

"There's still pelmeni in the fridge. And borscht. And half a casserole."

"Syrniki don't have to be scheduled, Shane."

Shane looked at the pan. Looked at Ilya. Looked at Anya, who had not blinked in approximately ninety seconds.

"Can I have one?"

"When they are done. If you are good."

Shane sat at the table. He didn't say anything else. Ilya plated six. Sour cream on the side — the good sour cream, not the one that tasted like chalk, the one from the European grocery on Rideau that Yuna had started buying because Yuna learned what you liked and then made sure you had it, without asking, without telling you, just quietly appearing in the fridge like a supply line you hadn't requested.

They ate standing at the counter. Shane on one side, Ilya on the other, the plate between them, and neither of them sat down because Ilya didn't sit for breakfast and Shane had stopped fighting him on it sometime around year two.

Anya stationed herself at the precise midpoint between their feet and waited.

"One," Ilya said. He tore a corner — small, no sour cream — and held it down. She took it from his fingers with the delicacy of a jeweler handling a diamond, then licked his entire hand up to the wrist.

"You're going to make her sick," Shane said.

"One syrniki has never killed a dog."

"You said that about the pelmeni."

"The pelmeni incident was her fault. She ate seven on her own. I gave her *one*."

Shane ate another syrniki and didn't argue. Outside, the sun was doing its August thing — pressing against the house, heating the

driveway, making the neighbor's hydrangeas wilt. Mrs. Ouellet would be out soon with the hose. Overwatering.

J.J. Boiziau called at four.

Shane's phone, from the living room. Ilya heard him answer — "Hey, J.J." — and something in the way Shane said the name made Ilya set down the knife he was using to chop onions for a soup nobody had asked for.

He came to the doorway. Shane was on the couch, phone to his ear, and his free hand was working — opening and closing, opening and closing, gripping a thing that wasn't there. His shoulders were set. His jaw was tight. The look he got before media scrums when he knew the first question was going to be the one he didn't want.

"Yeah," Shane said. "He's here."

A pause.

"You sure?"

Shane looked at Ilya. Held the look for a second. Then he put the phone on speaker and set it on the coffee table, carefully, the way you set down something that might go off.

"J.J.," Shane said. "You're on."

Nothing.

The silence went long. Three seconds. Five. Eight. On the other end, breathing — steady, then unsteady, then steady again. The sound of a man standing at the edge of something he'd walked toward for a long time and now didn't know how to step off.

"Shane," J.J. said.

His voice was deep. The French was underneath it the way it always was — English words, French architecture, the accent that thickened when J.J. was drunk or emotional.

"I never said I was sorry."

Shane didn't move.

"I got angry. When everything came out. I was angry you didn't tell me. I thought I was someone you trusted and you kept this thing — this huge thing — and I found out the same way everybody else did. On the news. Like a stranger."

J.J.'s breath snagged. A hitch. A catch.

"And I made it about me. I made your thing about my feelings. My ego. You were going through the hardest thing — the biggest, most exposed thing — and I was nursing my hurt. Guys turned their backs. I should have been the first one in that locker room to open his mouth, and I wasn't. I wasn't, Shane."

Anya came in from the kitchen. She stopped in the middle of the room, assessing the situation with the particular gravity she applied to human gatherings where no food was visible but emotions were high, which in her experience were unreliable events. She chose Ilya. Sat on his foot. Looked up.

"I was nursing my shit," J.J. said. "That's what I was doing. And you — you didn't call me out. You didn't yell at me. You didn't tell me I was being a selfish asshole who was making his best friend's life about his own feelings."

He stopped. The breathing again.

"You invited me to the wedding."

And J.J.'s voice broke. Not cracked — broke, the way something large and solid breaks, not quickly but with the whole weight of itself,

a sound that started in his chest and came through the phone like something physical.

"It was so beautiful, Shane. Your vows. And Ilya's face when he saw you walk in. And your mom — your mom was crying, and your dad had his arm around her, and everyone was — it was the most beautiful thing I've ever been in a room for and I didn't deserve to be there."

The living room. The afternoon light through the window, going gold the way August light went gold in Ottawa around four o'clock, when the sun dropped toward the river and everything warm got warmer. Shane on the couch. His hands flat on his thighs. His jaw set so tight Ilya could see the muscle working.

"I didn't deserve it," J.J. said. "And you let me be there and I never said thank you and I never said I'm sorry and I'm saying both right now. Both. That's what this call is."

Silence.

"Ilya," J.J. said. "You there?"

"Am here," Ilya said.

"I owe you an apology too. I don't know you well. I should know you better — that's on me. But I know you're good for him. I can see it. Everybody who's ever been in a room with you two can see it."

Ilya didn't know what to say. He'd met J.J. Boiziau four times off the ice. A man who stood six-six and carried two-forty and laughed from somewhere deep, and who was right now, crying into his phone about a wedding he'd almost missed because his pride was bigger than his friendship and he knew it and had been carrying that knowledge for years.

"You're going to get through this," J.J. said. "Both of you. Because I've watched you play together and I've watched you be together and

you are magic. On the ice, off the ice. Together you are unstoppable. You hear me?"

He stopped. Blew out a breath. Laughed — wet, embarrassed, the laugh of a man who'd meant to do this with dignity and had failed completely and was aware of it.

"Hayden warned you," J.J. said.

"He did," Shane said. His voice had changed. The tightness was different — not clenched now, but thin, like something held too tightly for too long that was starting to give.

"I'm six-six and two-forty and I'm in a parking garage crying. This is not how I planned this going."

"Very undignified," Ilya said.

J.J. laughed again. Wet and real and surprised. "Very undignified. Yeah."

Quiet.

"Take care of each other," J.J. said. "I mean it."

"We will," Shane said.

The call ended.

The room settled. The phone on the table. The light through the window. Anya still on Ilya's foot, her ears slowly flattening back to their resting position now that the alarming sounds had stopped.

Ilya had read it wrong.

The tightness before the call — the set jaw, the working hands. He'd thought Shane was bracing for something bad. Preparing for a hard conversation, the way Shane prepared for everything, with his body first and his words second.

But that wasn't it. Shane had known. Eleven years in the same locker room with a man. You know what he's carrying. You know when he's about to put it down. The tightness wasn't bracing.

Shane was pressing the heel of his hand against his eye. Just for a second. Then he dropped it and stood up.

"I'll make coffee," he said, and went to the kitchen.

Ilya stayed in the doorway. Anya stayed on his foot. From the kitchen, the sound of Shane opening the cabinet, getting the filters, running the water. The sounds of a man putting himself back together by making coffee, because the alternative was standing still, and Shane Hollander did not stand still.

The days had a texture.

Not a good one. The texture of waiting — of hours that felt like something should be happening and nothing was, or something was happening and it was invisible, legal, buried in filings and phone calls and the slow rotation of a system that did not care about your anxiety.

Melinda called with updates that sounded like previous updates said in slightly different order. Citizenship on track. Asylum file strengthened. Passport still valid, as of this morning, as of every morning, the daily confirmation that had become its own kind of torture — the relief of yes followed immediately by the dread of not yet. Martin filed supplemental briefs. The words "I'll keep you posted" appeared in every call, and Ilya had started to hear them the way you hear a clock — present, rhythmic, telling you nothing you didn't already know.

The house was full. It had been full for weeks and the fullness had become normal, which was its own strange thing — that you could get used to a security detail, to your mother-in-law running an empire from the guest room, to your father-in-law reading at the kitchen

table at seven a.m. like a man who had decided the world could come to him. Jensen's pool house hummed with equipment. Marie moved through the upstairs hallway at odd hours, checking the back windows, the roof line, the sight angles she'd mapped in her first week and updated every three days. These were the sounds of safety, and they were also the sounds of a life that had been rearranged around a threat, and Ilya couldn't always tell which was which.

He cooked. He swam. He walked Anya in the backyard — not the street, not the park, the backyard, because the backyard was the perimeter and the perimeter was what Jensen had cleared. Anya didn't seem to mind. The backyard had squirrels, which were her primary intellectual interest, and a fence that was too high for her to jump over, which occupied her strategically.

Jinky and Harris came on Thursday.

Jinky had data. Jinky always had data — the tablet, the phone, the laptop, the specific energy of a person who had found the thing they were built for and was running at it full speed. Harris had his own laptop, his own spreadsheets, his own quietly devastating competence.

They sat at the kitchen table — Jinky, Harris, Shane, Ilya. Yuna appeared in the doorway, listened for thirty seconds, and stayed.

"The support numbers," Harris said. He turned the laptop around. A graph — Jinky's data, visualized. The line for negative coverage was visible. The #TakeBackHockey accounts, the Russian propaganda feeds, the podcast ecosystem that had grown around hating them. A ridge on the graph.

The support line was three times higher.

"Thirty-eight thousand in the Legion," Jinky said. "Five platforms now. We picked up six thousand since the enemy designation." They looked at Ilya. "You being declared an enemy of Russia is the single

best recruitment tool I've ever had. I want to send *dorogoy lider* a thank-you note."

"Please don't," Shane said.

"It would be very short. Two words."

"Jinky."

"Fine. Three words."

Harris scrolled. "Forty-seven players posting from personal accounts. Not through agents — personal. The Canadian Bar Association's human rights section filed an amicus brief yesterday. Three law school clinics. And the arena data—" He pulled up another screen. Season ticket renewals, fan surveys, approval ratings by market. "Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto, New York, Boston. Your numbers are higher than any individual player in the league. Both of you."

"The haters are loud," Jinky said. "They have always been loud. That is what they do — they are loud. But they are not many. The people with you are many."

Yuna, from the doorway: "Show them the podcast."

Jinky grinned. "I was getting there."

The podcast was called *Hear Me Roar*. Three hosts — Roxy, Janeway, Rufus. Handles, not names. All queer, all hockey, all carrying the specific fury of people who had watched something they loved get used as a weapon against people like them.

Jinky played a clip. Roxy's voice came through the tablet speakers — the cadence of someone who'd coached something, maybe played something, the directness that came from years of being the loudest person in a room and deciding that was fine.

"Here's what keeps me up," Roxy said. "The atmosphere. Not one person. Not one podcast. Not one hashtag. The atmosphere. The

thing we've all built — collectively, with our silence and our shrugs and our 'I don't have a problem with it but' — where a man can love another man and his country declares him an enemy and half the internet says, 'Well, what did he expect?' That's the atmosphere. That's what our morals justify for us when we let them."

Rufus said something about the machinery of complicity. Janeway brought it back to the rink.

"And then," Roxy said, "you've got these #TakeBackHockey assholes. Anonymous keyboard warriors. Manifestos and algorithms. And I want to ask them — I am genuinely asking — do you think you alpha males can take on Hollander or Rozanov in a face-off? Hollander's got four Stanley Cups. Rozanov is six-three and could bench press your truck. They will eat you for breakfast and ask for seconds. You want to step on the ice with these two and tell them they don't belong?"

"Didn't think so," Roxy said.

Janeway and Rufus laughed — loud, sharp, unafraid. The sound of people who were not asking for permission to be angry.

Jinky stopped the clip. Looked at Ilya.

"Roxy played field hockey through university," Jinky said. "She knows what she's talking about."

"Field hockey," Harris said.

"Hockey is hockey."

"Field hockey is not hockey."

"The principle is the same."

Ilya laid down the law. "The principle is not the same. There is no ice."

Harris gave him a Look. "Ilya. You're gonna gate-keep now? Really?"

"Am just saying. Is a different sport."

Jinky stared at him. Then laughed. Short, surprised. "You're such an asshole."

"Yes," Ilya agreed. "But am an asshole with a good PR team."

Yuna had banned the Russian media.

He looked anyway.

Midnight. Shane next to him at the kitchen table. The laptop screen too bright, then dimmed, then still too bright — everything was too bright at midnight in a dark kitchen when you were about to read about yourself in a language your husband couldn't fully follow.

Anya was asleep on the couch in the next room. Her snoring came through the doorway — the wheeze-and-whistle of a dog who slept with her face pressed into the cushion and her body arranged at an angle that suggested her spine was decorative.

Shane had his hand on Ilya's forearm. Not gripping. Just there.

Russian state television had taken the enemy designation and run with it.

Channel One. Twelve minutes. The anchor — a woman Ilya had watched for years, in hotel rooms across North America, back when he watched Russian news to stay connected and not to see his own face — sat at her desk and spoke about Ilya Rozanov with the controlled disgust of a person describing an outbreak. Her voice was measured. Professional. The voice of a woman who knew how to make a name sound like a symptom.

They used his wedding photo. He saw it on the screen and his brain did the thing it did — split, for a moment, between the man who had been in that photo, standing in the backyard in Ottawa with Shane's hand in his, and the man watching it now in a dark kitchen while the Russian state used it as evidence. They used a photo of Shane that made Shane look smaller than he was, angled from above, the freckles washed out. Ilya understood the choice. You don't make the enemy's husband look beautiful. You make him look slight.

NTV. A panel. Five men in suits around a curved desk, the kind of set design that was supposed to look like debate and functioned as coordination. The chyron said ROZANOV: TRAITOR OR PUPPET? and Ilya translated it for Shane and then wished he hadn't, because Shane's hand tightened on his forearm.

One of the panelists — a former athlete, someone Ilya had shaken hands with at a federation dinner in Moscow when he was twenty-two, a man who'd smiled and told Ilya he had a great future — was saying that Ilya had always been troubled. Unstable. That the signs were there. That his mother's death should have been a warning.

"Signs of what?" Shane said.

Ilya closed the tab.

Komsomolskaya Pravda. An editorial that used the word *предатель* — traitor — seven times. *Враг* — enemy — four. A Duma member quoted by name: Ilya Rozanov had chosen perversion over patriotism, and Russia had no room for men who forgot their duty to their country, their blood, their faith.

Ilya closed the laptop. The kitchen went dark.

The fridge hummed. The clock on the microwave said 12:47. Shane's hand was still on his forearm.

When you are a child in Russia, you grow up thinking about what you will become. A doctor. A cosmonaut. A hockey player, if you are

lucky and your body cooperates and your father takes you to the rink at four in the morning when the ice is empty and the only sound is your blades and his breathing behind you. You think about these things with the assumption that the country you live in is yours, and you are its, and the relationship is as permanent as the weather.

You do not grow up thinking: someday, my country will declare me its enemy. Someday, the anchor you watched as a child will say your name like it's a disease. Someday, the man you shook hands with at a dinner will go on television and say your mother's death was a sign.

"Ilya," Shane said.

"Hm."

"Come to bed."

"In a minute."

Shane didn't move. He sat at the table in the dark kitchen with his hand on Ilya's arm and waited.

Alexei was in Moscow. His wife was in Moscow. His little niece was in Moscow. She was six and drew pictures of hockey players; had Ilya's eyes — the hazel, the shift between green and gold — and who might, right now, be asleep in her bed in an apartment where the phone didn't ring anymore because her father had told her uncle not to call.

Ilya didn't call.

Not because he didn't want to. Not because the impulse wasn't there — it was, every day, a dozen times a day, the reflex of reaching for the phone and then stopping. Alexei had told him. Over the summer, his voice tight and angry and terrified: *Don't contact me. For your sake and ours.*

So Ilya didn't.

He didn't know what the designation meant for a police officer in Moscow whose brother had been formally declared an enemy. Whether Alexei's superiors had questions. Whether there were consequences already, or consequences coming, or the slow bureaucratic tightening that Russia did so well — not a knock on the door but a narrowing of the hallway, until one day you realized you couldn't turn around.

He had lost his mother at twelve. She was in the ground in Moscow and he would never stand at her grave again. He had lost his father twice — to Alzheimer's and again in the third period of a Tuesday in November, when the phone rang and a voice told him his father was dead and Ilya didn't cry and didn't know what to feel and still didn't, years later, and that was its own kind of loss.

And now Alexei. Not to death. To silence. The particular cruelty of a loss where the person was alive and unreachable and you didn't know if the distance was their choice or someone else's, and it didn't matter, because the distance was the same either way.

The cross at his sternum. His thumb found it. Held.

Shane was still there. The hand on his arm. The dark kitchen. The hum of the fridge and the 12:51 on the microwave and the sound of Anya snoring one room away, dreaming about whatever dogs dreamed about — squirrels, socks, the eternal question of whether the food on the counter would ever, through persistence or divine intervention, make it to the floor.

Shane was his home.

Not Ottawa. Not Canada. Not the house with the backyard and the security detail and the pool house full of monitors. Shane. The hand on his arm. The waiting. The willingness to sit in a dark kitchen at midnight and not say the right thing or the wrong thing but just be

present, which was the hardest thing Shane Hollander did and the thing he did best.

"Okay," Ilya said. "Bed."

They went upstairs. Anya didn't move from the couch. She had claimed it hours ago and showed no intention of relinquishing her position for something as trivial as her humans changing rooms.

He swam at night.

Not every night. But the nights when his brain ran — when the Russian anchors played behind his eyes, when *враг* sat behind his ribs, when the silence from Moscow was louder than any sound in the house — he went to the pool.

Jensen's command post was shut down by then. Monitors dark, laptop closed, the folding table bare. The pool house was a pool house again. The pool was just a pool — blue-green light moving on the surface, the chemical smell of chlorine that was nothing like the rink but also, somehow, adjacent. Both were cold. Both were contained. Both were places where the body took over and the brain, for a few minutes, agreed to be quiet.

He swam until it hurt. Arms pulling through the water, flip turns that sent waves over the tiled edge, the rhythm of breath — in above the surface, out below — that became, after enough laps, the only thought. Thirty. Thirty-five. Forty. Each number replacing something. Wall for Moscow. Turn for Alexei. Breath for *враг*. *Enemy*.

Forty-three.

He stopped at the deep end, arms draped over the edge, chest heaving. The sky was enormous. Ottawa in late August — the stars bright, the air carrying the first suggestion of September, a coolness that wasn't cold yet but would be, soon, the way everything that was

coming would be here soon whether he was ready or not. Training camp. The season. Christmas. The decision.

He didn't know how long he'd been out there when the back door opened.

Shane came across the yard barefoot. He was carrying a towel and wearing the t-shirt he slept in and the shorts with the hole in the left pocket that Ilya had told him to throw away three times and Shane had ignored three times because Shane did not discard things that still functioned, even minimally, even with a hole.

He set the towel on the chair by the pool. Sat down. Pulled his knees up. His hair was flat on one side from the pillow.

He didn't say anything.

Ilya did two more laps. Slow ones — the exhaustion had done its work, the muscles heavy and warm, the brain quieter. He came back to Shane's end and hung there, arms on the deck, water streaming off his shoulders, looking up.

"Could not sleep," Ilya said.

"I know."

"Did not want to wake you."

"You didn't. Anya did." Shane paused. "She went to the back door and whimpered at it until I got up. Then she went back to the couch."

"She reported my location and returned to base."

"Very professional."

Ilya hauled himself out. Sat on the deck next to Shane's chair, dripping. Shane handed him the towel. He put it around his shoulders and sat there — wet, heavy, the night air cooling the water on his skin.

Quiet for a while. The pool light on the water. A car somewhere on the street, distant. The neighbor's sprinkler starting on a timer, running for thirty seconds, stopping.

"Shane."

"Hm."

"Am trying to be strong."

His English came apart when he was tired. When the thing underneath pushed up through the layers he'd built over it. He heard it happening and didn't correct it because correcting it would mean putting the layers back, and he couldn't. Not tonight.

"Am trying to handle this. To be okay. For you. For your parents. For everyone who is in this house because of me."

"Ilya—"

"Your mother is running her life from the guest room because of me. David is calling in favors he has been saving for thirty years. Jensen sleeps in pool house. Marie has gun in the nightstand. Because I kissed you on the ice. Because I did not think—"

"Because of us."

"Because I did not think about what comes after. I thought about you. Only you. Standing on ice with Cup and your face and I kissed you and I would do it again — I would do it a thousand times — but I did not think about what it would cost. And now Russia says I am their enemy and there are men with guns and your family is here like—"

"Ilya."

"And even if it is resolved. Everything. The citizenship and the asylum and everything Martin and Melinda say. Russia does not forget. Does not forgive. I will look over my shoulder for the rest of my life."

His voice was flat. Not performed. The absence of performance — the thing that happened when Ilya Rozanov stopped being the version of himself that the world got and became the version that only existed here, at night, with the water drying on his skin and Shane next to him.

"And you will be standing next to me. Which means you will be looking too. And your children — *our* children, if we — they will be looking too. And I cannot ask you to—"

"You're not asking."

Shane's voice was quiet. Not soft — quiet. The difference mattered. Soft was comfort. Quiet was decision.

"You never have to face anything alone. That's done. We're on the same side now."

The pool light. The water, still now. The stars. Shane's face in the blue-green light — the dark eyes, the freckles invisible in this light, the jaw that was his mother's jaw, set and certain.

"Being married means fighting together. Not just the good part. The hard part. All of it. Winning Cups together."

He was quiet for a beat.

"Someday, maybe being dads together."

Ilya's hand found the cross. Held it. The metal warm from his skin, from the swimming, from the night.

"Misha," Ilya said.

"Yeah."

"Misha would be lucky."

"Misha would be a handful."

"Misha would be *our* handful."

Shane leaned into him. Dry t-shirt against wet skin. Ilya's arm went around him — heavy, soaked, chlorine and pool water seeping into the cotton — and Shane pressed into it, not away.

They sat. The pool stilled. The sprinkler next door started again, ran its thirty seconds, stopped. Somewhere in the house, Anya was asleep on the couch, having completed her surveillance mission — report the swimmer's location, confirm the second human was responding, return to base — and retired for the evening.

After a while, Ilya said, "Am getting you wet."

"I know."

"Your shirt is ruined."

"It's a free shirt from a charity golf tournament."

"Which one?"

"2019. The children's hospital thing."

"Then is no loss."

Shane laughed. Small. Quiet. The laugh that was just for Ilya — not the public one, not the media one, not the one that served a function. This one. Here.

They stayed by the pool until the air got cold enough that staying stopped being a choice and became stubbornness, and then they went inside, and Anya was on the couch exactly where they'd left her, and she opened one eye when they passed, confirmed they were alive, and closed it again.

Training camp started on a Tuesday.

Jensen drove. Marie in the passenger seat, her eyes on the mirrors in the rhythm Ilya had learned to recognize — check, check, check, a pattern that never stopped and never drew attention to itself. Ilya and Shane in the back. Anya had been left with Yuna, who had promised to take her into the backyard and who would, Ilya knew, also give her a piece of whatever Yuna was eating, because Yuna's podcast ban was absolute but her food discipline around the dog was not.

The city through the window. Streets he'd driven a thousand times — the route to the rink, the left on Riverside, the bridge over the canal, the turn past the coffee shop where the woman who owned it always waved because she'd been waving since Ilya was traded here and had never stopped, even now, even with everything. She was out front. She waved. Ilya waved back.

His passport was valid. As of this morning. Martin's contacts had confirmed it at six a.m. — the daily check, the daily answer, the daily breath between not yet and not ever.

The parking lot was wrong. That was the first thing — the shape of it was different, media vans occupying the spaces where players normally parked, a credentialing tent set up near the entrance, cables running across the asphalt like veins. Security at the player door — not just arena staff but additional personnel, the ones Jensen had coordinated with Harris over two weeks of preparation that Ilya had heard happening through the pool house walls without being part of it.

Ilya got out. The air was different too. September. The heat broken. A coolness that smelled like leaves and pavement and the specific crispness that Ottawa got in early fall when the summer finally let go. The season was here. He could feel it in the air the way he'd always felt it — the body knowing before the calendar confirmed.

Inside, the building swallowed them.

The hallway from the player entrance to the locker room was the same hallway it had always been — concrete, fluorescent lights, the

scuff marks on the walls from equipment bags dragged through over years, the faint smell of industrial cleaner and something underneath it, older, colder. Ice. Even here, fifty feet from the rink surface, you could smell the ice. It got into the building's bones.

Coach Wiebe was outside the coaches' office. He saw Ilya coming down the hallway and stepped out and shook his hand — both hands, the grip firm, the eye contact steady, held for two seconds longer than a handshake needed to be held.

"Welcome back," Wiebe said.

"Thank you, Coach."

"We've got work to do."

Wiebe turned back into the office. That was it. No speech. No acknowledgment of the summer, the shooting, the designation, the vans in the parking lot. Just: there is work and you are here to do it. Ilya had played for coaches who talked too much and coaches who talked too little and Wiebe was the rare one who talked exactly enough.

Fred Johnson was at the bench. Of course Fred was at the bench — Fred was always at the bench, the way the boards were always at the boards, a fixed point in the geometry of the rink. He had the clipboard. The glasses. The inhaler in his breast pocket, which he touched once as Ilya approached — a check, not a use, the habit of a man who'd carried an inhaler since childhood and had never lost the reflex of confirming it was there.

"Ilya. Good." Fred didn't look up from the clipboard. "Breakout drill. Same structure as June, but I've rebuilt the neutral zone transition. I need you at center for the first unit."

"Of course."

Fred drew a line on the clipboard. Drew another. Frowned at the second one, erased it, drew it again.

The locker room.

It smelled the same. Every locker room smelled the same and also different — the same base notes of sweat and rubber and industrial soap, and then the specifics, the things that made this room this room: the faint camphor from the training staff's supplies, the coffee that someone always brought in and set on the shelf by the door, the lingering ghost of Zane Boodram's shawarma from a thousand postgame meals.

His stall. ROZANOV 81. The pads arranged the way the equipment staff knew to arrange them — left to right, top to bottom, tape on the shelf, stick in the rack — because Ilya had explained the order once, four years ago, and they'd never asked again.

He sat down. Touched the nameplate. The metal was cool.

Wyatt Hayes was across the room, half-dressed, pads on, jersey off, his hair in a state of creative disorder.

"Roz!" Wyatt crossed in three strides. "Bro. I missed you. I missed your face."

"You saw my face six weeks ago."

"Six weeks is forever. Things happened. Your face changed. It's more — it's got more situation going on now. More gravitas."

"Gravitas."

"Big word. I've been reading."

"You read all the time, your comics..."

"My wife bought me a book over the summer. A novel, no pictures. I read — some of it." Wyatt sat on the bench next to Ilya's stall, which

was not his bench and not his stall, but Wyatt treated physical space the way he treated conversational space, which was as a suggestion. "Also I missed your weird Russian snacks."

"They are not weird."

"Last year you brought that fish thing."

"Shuba. Is a salad."

"It was herring under a fur coat of beets, Ilya."

"Is traditional."

"It lives in my nightmares. I mean that with love."

Ilya pulled on his base layer. Wyatt was still talking — he was always talking, the volume and velocity a constant, a frequency that filled the room without demanding anything from it. It was not quiet. It was not restful. It was the sound of a teammate who was exactly the same as he had been in May, and Ilya needed things that were exactly the same.

Zane came in. Equipment bag in one hand, shawarma bag in the other — the shawarma place on Bank Street, the one the team had been ordering from since before Ilya arrived, the one that knew Zane's order by his voice on the phone. He set the shawarma between their stalls. Nodded at Ilya. Sat down. Started getting dressed.

That was Zane. The nod. The food. The presence that required no narration and no response.

Troy was in his stall already. Laced up, visor down, working his stick tape with the precision of a man who had been doing the same thing the same way for twelve years. He'd looked at Ilya when Ilya came in — one look, one small nod — and gone back to his hands. Troy, who sat in rooms and let his presence do the work. Ilya remembered

what Shane had told him — Harris saying Troy hadn't slept in four days, back in August. He looked like he was sleeping now. But Troy had always been hard to read, and Ilya had been wrong about people before and would be wrong about people again.

Luca Haas came in later than most. His second full season, fifty-one points behind him. He'd gotten broader over the summer — shoulders, chest, the build settling into something that said he'd stopped being a prospect and started being a player. He stopped at Ilya's stall.

"Captain."

"Haas."

"Good to have you back."

"Good to be back."

Luca held the look for a beat. Whatever he was thinking — and Ilya could guess, but guessing wasn't knowing — he kept it behind his eyes and moved to his stall. That was enough. A beat held too long was sometimes the most honest thing a young player could offer.

The room filled. Tape being torn, sticks tapped on the rubber floor, the low murmur of twenty-something men getting ready. The sound hadn't changed in fifteen years of Ilya's career — different rooms, different cities, different teams, but the sound was always the same, the way the smell of ice was always the same, a constant underneath everything that moved and changed and threatened to break.

Most of them came to Ilya in the first minutes. A hand on the shoulder. A grip on the back of the neck. "Good to see you, Cap." Said quick, said easy, the way you greeted a man who'd been away too long and whose return you'd been waiting for, said without weight because the weight was understood.

Two were different. Maybe three. They said the right things — "Welcome back, Cap," "Good summer?" — but their eyes went past him, to the wall, to the floor, to a point that wasn't Ilya. They were careful in a way that wasn't warmth. Something they'd decided, or something they were deciding, and they'd carried it through the doors with them. Ilya saw it. He'd been seeing it since he was fourteen, in locker rooms in Russia, where the wrong kind of attention was the kind that ended things.

He didn't react. He taped his stick. He adjusted his pads. He waited.

"All right," Wiebe said from the doorway. Not loud. Wiebe never raised his voice on the first day. The first day was about showing up, not about performing. "Let's go."

The tunnel.

Rubber mats under his skates. The light changing — hallway fluorescent to tunnel dim to the opening ahead, where the rink surface waited, white and bright and impossible to look at without squinting until your eyes adjusted, and they always adjusted, every time, the same small shock and the same small recovery.

Shane was beside him. Number 24. The black hair under the helmet, the dark eyes visible through the visor, the compact build that moved through the tunnel the way it moved through everything — forward, certain, taking up exactly as much space as it needed and not an inch more.

The boards. The glass. The lights.

Ilya stepped onto the ice.

The cold hit his face first, then his hands, then the inside of his lungs — the sharp clean cold of fresh ice in September, harder than summer ice, faster, the surface newly cut and gleaming. His skates bit and held. His legs found the rhythm — the push, the glide, the crossover — that had been in his body since he was three years old

and his brother held his hand on the rink in Moscow at an hour when no one else was alive.

The noise stopped.

Not the rink noise — that was there, it was always there, skates on ice, sticks on pucks, coaches calling from the bench, the echo that a rink made when it was full of players and purpose. That noise stayed. That noise was the point.

The other noise. The anchors. The editorials. The word *враг*. The silence from Moscow. The men at the door. The man in the parking lot. The photograph of his face on Russian state television, used as evidence of something he was guilty of only in the sense that he was guilty of being alive and in love and unwilling to pretend otherwise.

That noise stopped. Not forever. It would come back tonight, and tomorrow, and the day after, and probably every day for the rest of his life. He knew this. He had known this since June, since the phone call from Alexei, since the first time he understood that the cost of the kiss was not a moment but a duration — a thing that would last as long as he lasted, a tax on every day that followed.

But not here. Not on the ice. Not with his stick on the surface and his legs under him and the geometry of the rink — the blue lines, the red line, the circles, the boards — arranged around him like the only architecture that had never lied to him.

Shane was on his left. Where Shane always was. Where Shane had been since the trade, since Ilya stopped being across the ice from him and started being next to him, and the whole sport changed, and Ilya changed, and neither of them had ever gone back.

He took the puck on his tape. Crossed the blue line.

The drill started. Fred's drill — the rebuilt neutral zone transition, the breakout modified, the structure familiar underneath the changes.

Ilya ran it. His body ran it. His body knew what to do, and for the first time in months, his brain let it.

They played.

Shane

Chapter 14: Shane

The podcasts come back for the season. So does Russia. A preseason game against Montreal puts Shane and Ilya on the ice against old friends, and in the stands, three parents share orange slices and history. On a stick blade, a Russian word that nobody can translate. After the game, Shane takes care of his husband the only way he knows how — completely.

Eight days to New York.

The podcasts came back like the weather.

Not all at once — in layers, the way September settled over Ottawa. First the hockey ones, returning from their summer breaks with prediction episodes and ranking arguments and the annual ritual of pretending this year's rosters meant anything before anyone had played a game. Then the others, the ones that had grown up around Shane and Ilya's summer the way moss grows on the side of a building you didn't ask it to grow on.

Top Shelf dropped their season preview on a Monday. Fitz and Brewer — ninety minutes of predictions, division breakdowns, over-unders. They mentioned Shane and Ilya twice. Both times by full name, both times in hockey context, both times with the careful neutrality of men who had spent the summer recalibrating and were not yet sure where to land. They picked the Centaurs to finish third in the Atlantic. They did not mention the asylum filing or the extradition or the shooting.

"Interesting," Mom said, when Shane told her. She was at the kitchen table with her laptop and a green tea and three phones.

"Interesting" was Mom's word for *I've noticed and I'm filing it and you will hear my thoughts when I've finished having them.*

Two Hockey Chicks was warmer. Sammy and Trix did their season predictions — Centaurs to win the Atlantic, Ilya for Hart Trophy, Luca Haas as breakout player. They spent four minutes on the off-ice situation, said what they needed to say, and moved on. Professional. Respectful. The maturity of two women who understood that saying the same thing louder was not the same as saying it better.

Real Hockey was different.

Real Hockey had gotten handles over the summer. Puck, Blade, and Goalie — the original three minus one, because Justin Rickles had quit on-air in August and the clip had been viewed four million times and Rickles was now doing guest spots on legitimate sports radio where people used their real names.

Puck and Blade were the two who stayed. Goalie was new.

The internet had already had its way with the handles. The Hockey Queens Legion had created a meme generator that put the names on stock photos of middle-aged men at backyard barbecues. Jinky had shared seventeen of them in the group chat. The best one was a man in cargo shorts holding a spatula with the caption BLADE: TACTICAL GRILL MASTER. Ilya had laughed at that one — actually laughed, the sound that came from the real place and not the performance place — and Shane had saved the image to his phone because he wanted to remember what that laugh looked like.

Goalie was the problem.

The other two were noise — angry, inarticulate, the kind of men who said "I'm not a bigot, but" and then were, reliably and thoroughly, bigots. They were easy to dismiss because they were easy to hear. You knew what they were in ten seconds.

Goalie was harder.

He'd almost made the draft. Shane didn't know which year or which team — Jinky was working on it, because Jinky was always working on something — but the almost was in his voice. The way he talked about the game had the specificity of a man who'd been close enough to smell the ice and then been told to go home.

He knew systems. He knew positioning. He could break down a power play with genuine intelligence, and then, in the same sentence, slide into the thing he actually wanted to talk about, which was that hockey had lost its way and the people who were ruining it were the people who wanted it to be about anything other than hockey.

He never said Shane's name. He never said Ilya's. He said "the situation in Ottawa" and "the current climate" and "when the sport becomes a platform." He asked questions he already had answers to. He spoke in a tone that sounded reasonable if you weren't listening for the knife, and if you were, the knife was all you heard.

Harris had flagged him. "This one's different," Harris had said, in the tone Harris used when something worried him, which was the same tone Harris used for everything because Harris processed worry by getting competent at it. "The other two are clowns. This one's a recruiter."

Hear Me Roar opened their season with predictions and fury. Roxy picked the Centaurs to win the Cup. Janeway picked Montreal. Rufus refused to pick because picking was "heteronormative bracket culture" and then picked Ottawa anyway. They broke down the Atlantic division with genuine hockey knowledge — Roxy on defensive structures, Janeway on goaltending, Rufus on special teams — and then Roxy said, "Also, Russia filed an extradition request for Ilya Rozanov this morning, so maybe we should talk about that," and they did, for forty minutes, and it was the best analysis of the legal situation Shane had heard from anyone who wasn't Martin Sotto.

The extradition news came at six in the morning.

Shane's phone. Martin's name on the screen. Shane was already awake — he was always awake before the phone rang on days when the phone was going to ring, as though his body had learned to anticipate the specific frequency of bad news.

"Russia filed a formal extradition request through diplomatic channels last night," Martin said. No preamble. Martin didn't do preamble on days like this. "It was submitted to Global Affairs Canada. I have the filing."

Shane was in the kitchen. Coffee not yet made. Anya at his feet, her head tilted, watching him the way she watched him when his voice changed — when the pitch went flat and the words got shorter and the body went still.

"What does it mean?" Shane said.

"It means Russia is escalating. Canada has no extradition treaty with Russia, so the request will be denied. That's not the point. The point is the filing itself — it creates a diplomatic event. Canada has to formally respond. The news will cover it. And it's the predicate for what I expect comes next."

"The passport."

"The passport."

Martin was quiet for a beat. Shane could hear him thinking — the particular quality of Martin's silence, which was not absence but processing, the same way a computer was not off when the screen was dark.

"I've been expecting this move for two weeks," Martin said. "The extradition request is the warning shot. The passport revocation is the follow-through. I expect it before your first away game."

"New York is in eight days."

"I know. The emergency motion paperwork is drafted. It's sitting on my desk. The moment Russia moves on the passport, I file. Seventy-two hours to a refugee travel document. Ilya plays."

"You're sure."

"I've been sure for a month. The law hasn't changed. My preparation hasn't changed. What's changed is Russia's timeline, and they're moving faster than I'd like."

"What do we do today?"

"You play hockey. You win the game. You let me handle this."

Shane hung up. Made coffee. Stood at the counter and drank it and looked at the backyard — the fence, the neighbor's garden, the pool house where Jensen's lights were already on because Jensen's lights were always on before Shane's were.

Ilya came downstairs at seven. He stopped in the kitchen doorway, looked at Shane's face, and said, "What."

Not a question. A reading. Ilya read Shane the way Shane read spreadsheets — by looking at the data and knowing.

"Martin called," Shane said.

He told him. Ilya stood in the doorway with his arms crossed and his face still and listened. When Shane finished, Ilya was quiet for a long time.

"Okay," Ilya said.

"Okay?"

"Okay. Martin is ready. We are ready. We play hockey today."

"Ilya—"

"Shane. We play hockey today."

Anya thumped her tail against the floor, sensing that the confusing human sounds had resolved into a tone she recognized as *finished*, which in her experience was often followed by breakfast.

Ilya fed her. Then he made eggs — not because he was hungry, but because his hands. Always his hands.

The drive to the rink was twenty minutes. Jensen drove. Marie in the passenger seat with her eyes on the mirrors in the rhythm Shane had learned to stop noticing — check, check, check, the pattern that never drew attention to itself unless you knew it was there. Shane and Ilya in the back. The city through the windows. September.

The parking lot was worse than training camp. Media vans — six of them now, not three. Two satellite trucks. The credentialing tent had expanded. The extradition story had broken on the wires at seven-thirty and by the time they arrived at nine, every sports outlet and half the political desks in the country were already in the building.

Harris was at the player entrance. He had his phone in one hand and his new intern Milt trailing behind him with a tablet, and Harris's face had the specific expression it wore when the situation had exceeded normal parameters but not yet exceeded Harris's capacity to manage it, which was a wide range.

"The extradition filing is the lead story on every network," Harris said, falling into step beside them. "I've got forty-seven credential requests for today's game. Preseason. Forty-seven."

"Normal preseason number?" Shane asked.

"Twelve."

"Right."

"I've set the podium protocol. Postgame availability is Shane and Ilya only, fifteen minutes, credentialed press, no Russian state media. Milt's handling the overflow room."

Milt, behind them, nodded. He was twenty-two and looked nineteen and had the energy of a person who had been thrown into deep water and was swimming hard and not yet sure if he was drowning.

"The league office called," Harris said. "The Commissioner's people have a pregame statement. Support for the players, condemnation of the extradition filing, the usual."

"Is it the usual?" Ilya said.

Harris looked at him. "No. It's not the usual. But she's doing it anyway, and I'll take it."

The locker room.

Preseason had a texture that was different from regular season — looser, louder, the mix of veterans who'd been here for years and young guys in camp trying to earn a spot. The veterans dressed in their stalls with the economy of men who'd done this a thousand times. The young guys dressed slower, looking around more, trying to seem like they belonged. Shane remembered that feeling. He didn't miss it.

He sat in his stall. Pulled the tape from his bag — white, always white — and started wrapping. Left hand first, then right, then the stick. He took the stick between his knees and wrote on the blade in black marker, the way he'd done before every game since he was nineteen. Y-U-N-A. Four letters. His mother's name. The cameras had caught it years ago and it had become a thing — a story, an image, the kind of detail that journalists put in profiles because it was easy and warm and true.

Across the room, Ilya was taping his stick.

Shane watched. He always watched this part, even though he'd seen it hundreds of times, because the thing Ilya did was the thing Shane loved most about him and Ilya didn't know that, and Shane had never told him, because some things were better left unobserved and unspoken and just *known*.

Ilya wrote on his blade in black marker. Cyrillic. Small, neat letters — *солнышко*. *Solnyshko*. Little sun. The word Ilya used for Shane when they were alone — in bed, in the kitchen at midnight, in the car with the windows up. The cameras had caught the Cyrillic before. A reporter had asked once. Ilya had smiled his public smile and said, "Is good luck," and walked away, and the reporter had printed that, and it had become the story. Good luck. A superstition. The Russian thing.

Nobody knew what it said. Nobody except Shane, and Shane wasn't going to tell them, because it was his, the only thing in this entire public catastrophe of a life that was only his.

Ilya finished taping. Then he reached under his base layer and unclasped the chain — the gold chain, his mother's chain, the one that held the cross. He slid his wedding band off his left hand. Kissed it — pressed it to his lips, not quickly, not for show, just the way you kiss something you're putting away for safekeeping — and threaded it onto the chain next to the cross. His mother's cross. His husband's ring. Together against his chest.

He clasped the chain. Tucked it under the base layer. Looked up.

At Shane.

Not at the room. Not at anyone else. The hazel eyes and the lopsided mouth and the look that said *I'm here and you're here and that is the only thing that matters*.

Shane held the look. One second. Two.

Then he went back to taping his stick, because they were in a locker room full of teammates and there were limits to what you could do with your face before Wyatt made a comment, and Wyatt always made a comment.

Troy was in his stall, already dressed, earbuds in, EDM leaking from the edges. He'd been the first one in this morning — Troy was always first, the discipline of a man who'd rebuilt himself from the ground up and used punctuality as scaffolding. He nodded at Shane. The nod said: *I'm here. I know. We go*.

Zane was across the room, eating something from a Tupperware that smelled like jerk chicken at nine-thirty in the morning, which was Zane. Cassie's cooking. Zane ate her food before games the way other men stretched or meditated — it was ritual, it was preparation, and if you said anything about the smell, Zane would offer you some, and you would accept, because Cassie Boodram's jerk chicken was a legitimate competitive advantage.

Wyatt was pulling on his pads. The process of a goalie getting dressed was longer and more architectural than anyone else's — the leg pads, the chest protector, the mask on the shelf waiting, the glove and the blocker set precisely where Wyatt set them, which was left-right-left with the glove palm-up because Wyatt had a system and the system was non-negotiable.

"Okay," Wyatt said to nobody in particular. "I've decided. Today's energy is Captain America: Winter Soldier. Specifically the elevator scene."

"Nobody asked," Troy said, without removing his earbuds.

"The elevator scene is about knowing you're surrounded and fighting anyway. It's perfect. It's exactly this."

"It's a preseason game against Montreal," Zane said.

"It's a *metaphor*, Zane."

Luca Haas came in. He'd grown over the summer — not just the frame, which was broader, the shoulders thicker, the legs that carried him differently — but something in the way he entered a room. Less careful. More present. He'd been fifty-one points and a twenty-two-year-old finding out what he was, and now he was twenty-three and he knew, and the knowing was in his walk.

Evan Dykstra was taping his stick in the corner. Steady, quiet, the defenseman's economy of motion. Chouinard beside him, doing the same. The blue line partnership that had anchored the Centaurs' defense for three seasons — Dykstra physical, Chouinard mobile, the two of them communicating in a language that was half hockey and half marriage.

Tanner Dillon. Boyle. Holmber. LaPointe. Young. The room filling up, the sound building — tape, sticks, the murmur of men getting ready.

Wiebe came in. Stood in the middle of the room. Waited until the noise settled.

"Montreal," Wiebe said. "Preseason. I don't care about the score. I care about the systems. I care about the execution. I care about sixty minutes of hockey that looks like us."

He paused.

"There's a lot of noise outside this room today. You've seen it. You'll see more of it. That's not your job. Your job is in here and on the ice and nowhere else. Play your game. Trust each other. Win your shifts."

He looked at Ilya. "Captain."

Ilya stood. The room went quiet — the particular quiet of twenty-plus men waiting for the person who held the room.

"Is preseason," Ilya said. "Does not count for standings. But it counts for this—" He tapped his chest, over the cross, over the ring.

"Everything outside, we cannot control. Everything in here, on the ice — this is ours. This we control. So we go out and we play like Centaurs. We play fast. We play hard. We play together."

He looked around the room. Every face.

"Together," Ilya said. "Yes?"

The room answered. Not with a shout — with a sound, the specific low rumble of a team agreeing, the way a team agrees when the agreement is real and not performed. Sticks on the floor. Hands on pads. The sound of yes.

Warmups.

The ice was preseason ice — clean, fast, the Zamboni fresh, the lines bright. Shane took his first lap and his legs found the rhythm immediately, the crossover at the red line, the stop-and-start at the far boards, the puck on his tape moving in the pattern he'd been running since juniors. Muscle memory. The body knew what to do even when the brain was full of extradition filings and diplomatic channels and Martin's voice on the phone at six a.m.

He looked up at the stands. Section 112. Row eight.

Mom was there. She was always there — always the same section when she could get it, always the same posture, the straight back, the focused eyes, the intensity of a woman who watched hockey the way she did everything else: completely. Dad was beside her. Reading glasses on, program open, as if he was going to need to reference the line combinations, which he probably was, because Dad approached hockey games the way he approached everything: with preparation.

And next to Dad — Susan Pike. Hayden's mother. She was smaller than Shane remembered, or maybe it was just that he hadn't seen her in person since the wedding. She had her coat on even though

the building was heated, the way she always had her coat on, and her purse on her lap, and Shane knew — he knew with absolute certainty — that there were orange slices in that purse. Ziploc bag. Cut into quarters.

Susan Pike had been bringing orange slices to hockey games since Hayden was in peewee and she had never stopped and nobody had ever asked her to, and Dad would eat them in the second period the way Dad had always eaten them, gratefully and without comment.

Three parents. Two families. One history.

Shane took another lap. Across the ice, in red and white and blue, Hayden Pike was doing the same drill Shane was doing — the same one, the same pattern, because they'd played together for eleven years and their warmup routines had merged the way everything merges when you spend a decade beside someone.

Hayden caught his eye. Grinned. Held up one finger — *first goal's mine.*

Shane held up four fingers. *Four Cups*.

Hayden laughed and skated away.

J.J. Boiziau was on the Voyageurs' blue line, taking shots from the point. He was enormous — even on skates, even in pads, even among professional athletes, J.J. Boiziau looked like a man who had been drawn at a different scale. His slapshot hit Drapeau's glove and Drapeau shook his hand. J.J. noticed Shane watching and gave him a nod. Not a smile. A nod. Game time. The phone call was the phone call. This was this.

Puck drop.

Shane took the opening faceoff against Montreal's first-line center. A big kid — six-one, fast hands, the confidence of a player who'd had a

good preseason camp. Shane watched his grip, his weight distribution, the slight forward lean that said he was going for the pull.

Shane went low. Stick blade flat. The puck dropped and Shane had it — clean, back between his skates, Zane already there to pick it up and push it up the wall.

First possession. Ottawa.

The opening shift was about rhythm. Wiebe's system — the one Fred had rebuilt over the summer, the neutral zone transition that was new, the forecheck that was the same. Shane's line: Shane at center, Ilya on the right wing, Zane on the left. The top line. The line that had won four Cups together — three for Shane, one for all of them in Ottawa.

Ilya got the puck along the right wall. Two Voyageurs converged — Gagnon from the point, a forward from the wing. Ilya held the puck. Held it. The patience of a man who had been doing this for fifteen years and knew that the play would open if he waited, and it did — Zane cutting to the net, Ilya feathering a pass through Gagnon's skates, Zane redirecting it toward the net. Drapeau got a pad on it. Whistle.

But the tone was set.

Second shift. Third. The teams trading zone time, the back-and-forth of two good teams still finding their legs. Shane's brain was doing the thing his brain did — tracking the patterns, the gaps, the way Montreal's defensemen rotated in the neutral zone. Chouinard picked up the puck behind the Ottawa net and hit Shane with a stretch pass at center ice. Shane took it in stride, crossing the Montreal blue line with speed, and he saw it — the lane, the seam between J.J. on the left and Roy on the right, the pocket of ice that would be there for one second and then close.

He didn't look at Ilya. He didn't need to.

The pass went through the seam. Tape to tape. Ilya was already there — the big body driving to the net, the stick blade open, the puck arriving exactly where Ilya knew it would arrive because they'd been doing this for six years and the language between them was older than words.

Ilya snapped it. Top corner. Over Drapeau's glove.

The arena erupted.

Shane watched Ilya's celebration — the fist pump, the grin, the teammates converging. Luca got there first, crashing into Ilya with the enthusiasm of a twenty-three-year-old who hadn't learned to be cool about goals yet. Troy was next. Zane. Dykstra from the point, his glove up.

Shane skated into the pile. Ilya found him. Grabbed the back of his helmet. Pulled him close.

"Thank you," Ilya said, grinning, his face six inches from Shane's.

"Don't thank me, finish them."

"Always."

1-0 Ottawa. First period. The building was loud.

Montreal pushed back. Hayden's line came over the boards — Hayden, Couillard, a young center Shane didn't recognize — and they cycled the puck in Ottawa's zone for forty-five seconds. Good possession. Patient. Hayden found a lane from the left circle and wristed one toward the top corner. Wyatt saw it late — the shot was screened by Dykstra — and got his blocker up but not enough. The puck hit the post. The sound of it — the *ping*, the metal vibration — echoed through the building.

Hayden tapped his stick on the ice. Next time.

The first period ended 1-0.

Between periods, Shane sat in his stall and drank water and listened to Fred's adjustments. Fred had the whiteboard out — the magnets, the X's, the arrows that Fred drew with the precision of an architect. Montreal was overloading the left side on their breakout. Ottawa could exploit the right wall with Ilya's speed.

"Their D is pinching early," Fred said. "Haas, if you get behind Gagnon on the counter, take the ice. He's slow recovering."

Luca nodded. Quiet. Intent.

Shane looked across the room at Ilya. Ilya was sitting in his stall, water bottle in hand, staring at the floor. His jaw was working. His eyes were somewhere else — not in this room, not on this game. Shane could see it. The extradition. Martin's call. The passport. The thing that was coming.

Shane got up. Crossed the room. Leaned down. Grabbed the back of Ilya's helmet — the same gesture from the ice, the grip on the cage, pulling Ilya's face toward his.

"Get in the game, Captain," Shane said. Quiet. Just for Ilya.

And whatever was in Shane's eyes — whatever Ilya read there, the thing that was hockey and also not hockey, the promise that was about the game and also about after, about what Shane would do when they were home and the pads were off and the rings were back on — it landed.

Ilya's eyes came back. The jaw loosened. The lopsided mouth moved.

"Yes, sir," Ilya said, and Shane felt the heat of it travel from his ears to his chest.

"Good," Shane said, and went back to his stall.

Second period.

Ilya was different. The distraction was gone — burned off or boxed or put somewhere that Shane couldn't see, which was what Ilya did, what Ilya had always done, the ability to take the thing that was hurting and put it somewhere else for sixty minutes and then deal with it later. It was not healthy. It was effective. Shane would worry about it tonight.

The second period opened with Ilya driving wide on the rush, beating Roy with speed — Roy, who had four inches on him, who played him physical along the wall and lost the battle because Ilya was six-three and two-twenty and when Ilya decided to win a board battle, the board lost. He cycled the puck low, drew J.J. toward him — J.J. who was enormous and mobile and who played Ilya with the respect of a defenseman who knew exactly what Ilya could do because J.J. had been on the wrong end of it for years.

Ilya pulled the puck back, found Troy cutting to the net. Troy deflected it. Drapeau stopped it with his pad. Whistle.

But the pressure was building.

Montreal answered. Hayden's line again — they were Montreal's best, and Hayden was playing with the intensity of a man who was not going to let his best friend beat him, friendship be damned. Hayden won a puck battle in the corner against Dykstra — Hayden was five-eight and Dykstra had six inches on him but Hayden was faster to the puck and meaner on the wall — and fed Couillard at the point. Couillard one-timed it. Wyatt dropped, got his pads together, and the puck hit him in the chest. He covered it.

"Captain America!" Wyatt shouted to nobody. "Elevator scene!"

"Shut up, Wyatt," someone said from the bench.

Luca scored at 8:47.

Fred's adjustment. Gagnon pinched on the Ottawa breakout, and Luca saw it — read the ice, took the lane behind Gagnon exactly the way Fred had drawn it on the whiteboard. Chouinard hit him with a long pass and Luca was gone, alone, the speed of a twenty-three-year-old whose body had finally caught up to what his brain could do. He came in on Drapeau — forehand, backhand, the puck moving like it was on a string — and roofed it. Clean.

Luca didn't celebrate like a kid anymore. He celebrated like a player — fist, skate back to the bench, accept the glove taps. But his eyes were bright. The growth spurt wasn't just physical. He was becoming something.

Montreal came back. Because Montreal always came back — that was what Montreal did, that was the franchise, the building, the fans who were louder than any building in the league and who did not accept losing quietly. A power play goal on a Dykstra tripping penalty — Hayden from the left circle, one-timer, the shot that Shane had watched Hayden practice ten thousand times in Montreal. Wyatt had no chance. 2-1.

Then Comeau, late in the period. A scramble in front of Wyatt's net — bodies, sticks, the puck loose on the ice. Comeau jammed it in. The Voyageurs' bench erupted. 2-2.

The second period ended tied. Shane looked up at section 112. Mom was leaning forward, her elbows on her knees. Dad was sitting back, arms crossed. Susan Pike was reaching into her purse.

She came out with a Ziploc bag. Orange slices. Cut into quarters.

Dad took one. Of course he did.

Third period.

Preseason. Didn't matter for standings. Mattered for everything else.

Shane won the opening faceoff again — same center, same pull move, same read. The kid would learn. Not tonight.

The period was fast. Tighter checking, fewer odd-man rushes, both teams respecting the danger of the other. Shane could feel the game tightening the way a game tightened when it was close and both sides wanted it — the ice shrinking, the lanes closing, every puck battle contested.

Ilya drew a penalty at 6:33. He drove to the net, took a cross-check from Roy across the back — not vicious, not dirty, but late and obvious, and the ref's arm went up. Power play.

Shane's unit. Shane at the half-wall, Ilya in the bumper, Luca on the right flank, Troy at the net front, Dykstra at the point. They set up. Shane moved the puck — wall to point, point to half-wall, half-wall to Ilya in the slot. Ilya held it. The Voyageurs' box shifted toward him, the penalty killers collapsing, because when Ilya Rozanov had the puck in the slot, you collapsed or you died.

Ilya didn't shoot. He slid it back to Shane.

Shane was alone. The lane was there — the space between J.J.'s stick and the post, the window that existed for half a second. Shane didn't think. He shot. Wrist shot, low, quick release.

The puck went through.

3-2.

The building came apart. Shane's arms went up — the reflex, the pure physical joy of a goal in a game that mattered even though it didn't matter, the oldest feeling in his body. Ilya was on him first. Then Luca, then Troy, then Dykstra barreling in from the point.

"That's my husband," Ilya said in the pile, loud enough for the line to hear, quiet enough for the crowd to miss.

"Shut up," Shane said, but he was smiling. He couldn't stop smiling.

They held the lead. The last ten minutes were a masterclass in Wiebe's system — collapsing, clearing, winning the small battles along the wall that didn't show up in highlights but showed up in wins. Wyatt made a save at 14:22 that Shane would remember for years — a 2-on-1, Hayden feeding Couillard, Couillard with the one-timer, Wyatt sliding across the crease and getting his pad on it, the puck deflecting wide. The sound Wyatt made — not a word, just a sound, primal and satisfied — was audible from the bench.

Zane scored into an empty net with thirty-eight seconds left. 4-2. The exclamation point.

The horn. The lights. The handshake line.

Shane went through the line. Handshake, handshake, the practiced grip-and-release of a ritual that was older than anyone on the ice. Comeau shook his hand and said something in French — quiet, fast, the Québécois accent that Shane had heard for eleven years in Montreal. Shane's French was rusty, but he caught *fier de toi*. Proud of you.

Hayden was next. The handshake became a hug — Hayden's glove on Shane's neck, pulling him in, the embrace of two men who'd been through more together than a hockey game could hold.

"Hell of a game," Hayden said into Shane's ear.

"Hell of a game," Shane said back.

Hayden pulled away. Grinned. "Jackie says hi. Mom brought orange slices."

"I know. My dad ate them."

"He always does," Hayden said.

Then J.J.

J.J. came through the line and he was not looking for Shane. He was looking for Ilya. Shane watched it happen — J.J. skating past the other handshakes, past the line, past the protocol, heading straight for Ilya Rozanov, and when he got there, he grabbed him.

Not a handshake. Not a hockey hug. J.J. Boiziau wrapped both arms around Ilya Rozanov and held him. Ilya was six-three. J.J. was six-six. And for a moment, in front of eighteen thousand people and every camera in the building, Ilya looked contained. Held. Small, almost, in the arms of a man who had cried on the phone two weeks ago and was not crying now but was holding on like the hold was the point.

Ilya's hand came up. Patted J.J.'s back. Once. Twice.

J.J. said something. Shane couldn't hear it. Nobody could hear it. The cameras caught the mouth moving but not the words, and that was fine. Some things didn't need to be broadcast to be true.

J.J. let go. Tapped Ilya's chest — right over the spot where the cross and the ring sat under the pads. Then he skated away.

Shane watched Ilya's face. The hazel eyes. The something that moved through them and settled.

Postgame.

The locker room was loud. Preseason win, but it didn't feel like preseason — the energy was different, higher, the kind of win that was about more than hockey and everyone knew it and nobody needed to say it.

Shane showered. Dressed. The ritual — the pants, the shirt, the jacket. He reached into the inside pocket of his equipment bag — the

zippered pocket, always the same pocket — and took out his wedding band. Slid it on. The metal cold, then warm.

Across the room, Ilya was doing the same thing differently. He unclasped the chain. Slid the ring off, away from the cross. Put it back on his left hand. Clasped the chain. Tucked the cross back under his shirt.

The cross alone again. The ring back where it belonged.

Shane caught his eye. Ilya raised his left hand. Wiggled the ring finger. The grin — the real one, the private one, the lopsided thing that was Shane's and Shane's alone.

Harris appeared in the doorway. "Podium in five. Shane and Ilya. Fifteen minutes. I've got Milt handling overflow."

"How's Milt?" Shane asked.

"Milt is learning," Harris said, in a way that suggested Milt was learning at a pace that was slightly behind the pace Harris needed him to learn.

The podium. The questions. Shane answered them the way he answered every postgame — precise, measured, hockey first. Yes, they were happy with the result. Yes, the systems were coming together. Yes, Luca Haas had a great game.

The extradition question came fifth.

"Shane, can you comment on the extradition request filed by Russia this morning?"

"Our legal team is handling it. We're focused on hockey."

"Ilya, are you concerned about—"

"Am focused on hockey," Ilya said. "Is what I do. Next question."

They held the line. Fifteen minutes. Harris cut it off at the mark, which was Harris — the human clock, the person who understood that fifteen minutes meant fifteen minutes and not sixteen.

The house was quiet when they got home.

His parents had gone to bed. Jensen checked the perimeter and disappeared into the pool house. Marie went upstairs after clearing the entire house. Anya greeted them at the door with the enthusiasm of a dog who had been abandoned for approximately six hours and had survived this ordeal through sheer force of will and access to a water bowl.

Ilya picked her up. She licked his chin, his jaw, the underside of his ear. He said something to her in Russian that Shane didn't catch and she wagged so hard her entire body curved.

Martin's call took forty minutes. Shane sat at the kitchen table with the laptop and the legal pad and wrote down everything Martin said, because that was what Shane did — he turned information into structure, because structure was the thing between him and chaos.

The contingencies. The timeline. The New York trip. If the passport was revoked before Thursday, Martin filed the emergency motion and they waited seventy-two hours — Ilya would miss the New York game but play Pittsburgh. If it was revoked after Thursday but before the flight, same process, Ilya missed both games. If it wasn't revoked at all, they flew as planned, but Martin wanted Jensen on the trip and additional documentation in Ilya's bag — the asylum filing receipt, the citizenship application, the letter from the Minister's office.

"And if it's revoked while we're in the US?" Shane asked.

"I've prepared for that," Martin said. "Emil Lathrop. Former US Attorney for the Southern District of New York. He left the office six years ago — he's in human rights law now. I've briefed him on Ilya's case. He's on standby for the New York trip."

"He's good?"

"He spent twelve years as a federal prosecutor in the most high-profile district in the country. He knows every judge in the Southern District by name. He's handled asylum emergencies on American soil before, and he's prepared to file in federal court the same day if necessary."

Shane wrote the name on the legal pad. Emil Lathrop. Underlined it.

"I still prefer the revocation happens here," Martin said. "On our soil, on our terms. Canadian courts, Canadian judges, Canadian law. But if it happens in New York, Emil files. If it happens in Pittsburgh, Emil files from New York and we coordinate with local counsel. There are no gaps."

"There are no gaps," Shane repeated.

"There are no gaps."

They hung up. Shane closed the laptop. Sat in the dark kitchen for a minute. Then he went upstairs.

Ilya was in the bedroom. He was sitting on the edge of the bed in his boxers, his elbows on his knees, his head hanging forward. The posture of a man whose body had given everything it had for three periods and was now presenting the bill. His shoulders were knotted. Shane could see it from the doorway — the tension in the trapezius, the way Ilya's neck was tilted slightly left, which was the side that seized up when Ilya was carrying stress in his body, which was always, because Ilya carried everything in his body.

Shane went to the bathroom. Got the oil — the bottle they kept in the cabinet, unscented, the one Ilya liked because scented things gave him headaches after games when his sinuses were raw from the cold air. He came back.

"Lie down," Shane said.

Ilya looked up. The hazel eyes. Tired. The game face gone, the public face gone, the Ilya Rozanov who gave interviews and made jokes and wore the smile like armor — gone. This was the one underneath.

"Shane—"

"Lie down."

Ilya lay down. Face-first into the pillow. The long body stretched across the bed, the muscles in his back visible under the skin, the tension written in the architecture of him.

Shane straddled his hips. Poured the oil into his hands. Warmed it.

He started at the shoulders. The trapezius — knotted, tight, the muscle fiber bunched under his thumbs. He pressed. Ilya made a sound into the pillow — not a word, just the sound a body makes when someone finds the place that hurts and pushes into it. Shane worked the knot. Slow. Steady. The way he did everything — methodically, with attention, with the focus he brought to game film and anything that mattered enough to do right.

"Jesus," Ilya said into the pillow.

"I know."

"Is like rock."

"It's been a rock for three weeks. You just don't notice until someone touches it."

Shane moved down. The rhomboids, the lats, the lower back where Ilya held the tension from his skating stride — the torque, the rotation, the years of explosive movement that had built muscle on top of muscle on top of damage. His hands spread across Ilya's back and Ilya was warm and solid under him, the body that had played

fifteen years of professional hockey and still moved like it had been designed for this sport and incidentally for everything else.

He found the spot at the base of Ilya's spine. Pressed. Ilya groaned — low, deep, the sound vibrating through the mattress.

"Good?" Shane said.

"Do not stop."

Shane didn't stop. He worked down Ilya's back, his thumbs tracing the muscles along the spine, finding each knot and pressing until it released, the slow unwinding of a body that had been holding itself together through force of will. The oil was warm. The room was quiet. Anya was on her bed in the corner, watching them with one eye open, assessing whether this activity was likely to produce food, and concluding that it was not, and going back to sleep.

He moved to Ilya's legs. The hamstrings — thick, powerful, tight from the skating. The quads. The calves. Shane worked them with patience and precision, and Ilya melted under his hands the way Ilya only melted here, in this room, in this bed, with Shane's hands on him and nobody watching.

"Turn over," Shane said.

Ilya turned. His eyes were half-closed. The hazel dark in the low light of the bedroom. His mouth was soft — the lopsided mouth, relaxed for the first time all day.

Shane kissed him. Not hard. Slow. The kiss that was for here, for midnight, for the two of them in a room where the door was closed and the world was outside and could stay there. Ilya's hand came up — the left hand, the ring hand — and rested on the back of Shane's neck. The metal of the band warm against Shane's skin.

Shane kissed his jaw. His neck. The hollow of his throat where the cross sat against skin. He kissed the cross — not because it was a

symbol, but because it was there, and it was Ilya's, and Shane kissed the things that were Ilya's.

He moved down. Ilya's chest. The stomach — tight, still, the muscles tensing under Shane's mouth. Lower. The waistband of his boxers. Shane hooked his fingers in the elastic and pulled them down and Ilya lifted his hips to help, the small cooperation of a body that knew what was coming and wanted it.

Shane took his time.

This was the thing about Shane Hollander that the world didn't know and would never know — that the man who organized everything, who controlled everything, who built spreadsheets and systems and structures around his life like fortifications, could also do this. Could kneel between Ilya's legs and take him into his mouth and be slow about it, deliberate, the focus that he brought to everything now narrowed to this single point of contact, this single act of giving.

Ilya's hand was in Shane's hair. Not gripping — resting. The fingers moving, stroking, the gentleness that was Ilya's secret, the thing he hid behind the size and the charm and the performance. His other hand was fisted in the sheets.

Shane found the rhythm. Slow. Ilya's breathing changed — deeper, less controlled, the sounds coming from a place that was not the locker room or the podium or the kitchen at midnight. This was the private frequency. The one that only existed here.

"Shane," Ilya said. His voice wrecked. "Shane, I—"

Shane didn't stop. He took more. Deeper. His hand on Ilya's hip, holding him steady, the thumb tracing the bone. Ilya's back arched — the tension building in his legs, his stomach, the hand in Shane's hair tightening now, and Shane let him, because this was the one place where Shane's control existed to serve someone else and he wanted Ilya to have it, all of it, the release that had been building for months.

Ilya came with a sound that was half Shane's name and half Russian, just the sound a body made when it stopped holding everything and let go. Shane stayed. Felt it. The pulse and the shudder and the slow easing of a man who had been bracing for impact since June and was, for this moment, not bracing.

Shane pressed his forehead to Ilya's hip. Stayed there.

"Come here," Ilya said. His voice was rough. Wrecked. The accent thicker, the way it got when the English went away and the Russian came up.

Shane moved up the bed. Ilya's arms went around him — the big arms, the tired arms, still smelling faintly of the oil. Ilya held him. Pressed his mouth to Shane's forehead.

"Thank you," Ilya said.

"You don't have to thank me."

"Am thanking you anyway."

They lay there. The room dark. The house quiet. The ring on Shane's hand warm against Ilya's back. The ring on Ilya's hand warm against Shane's neck.

Anya, who had apparently decided that the lack of food-related activity signaled an all-clear, jumped onto the bed and settled at their feet. She turned three times, which was her minimum, and collapsed with a sigh that suggested the day had been as exhausting for her as it had been for anyone.

"Eight days," Shane said.

"I know."

"Martin's ready. Emil Lathrop is ready."

"I know."

Quiet. Ilya's breathing slowing. The body going heavy against Shane — the weight of a man who was finally, after sixteen hours of holding himself together, letting someone else hold him.

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you," Shane said.

Ilya's arm tightened. Just slightly.

"I know," Ilya said.

Shane lay in the dark. Ilya's breathing deepened. Slowed. The rhythm of sleep taking him — slowly, then all at once, the way Ilya fell asleep, like a man walking off a cliff he trusted.

Eight days. New York. The road.

Shane closed his eyes. Didn't sleep. Held on.

Ilya

Chapter 15: Ilya

A ninety-minute flight to New York. A text message at thirty thousand feet. Three men in suits at the terminal, and a team that doesn't need to be told what to do. A lawyer with a folder. A court order with a clock. And in a hotel room in midtown, Shane says the only thing that matters: two things. That's all you need to think about. Me and hockey.

The charter was loud — cards in the back, music from someone's speaker, Wyatt talking about a documentary he'd watched about octopuses that nobody had asked about and nobody could stop.

Ilya sat in 4A. Window. His thumb was at his sternum, pressing the cross through his shirt without deciding to press it. His other hand was on the armrest and Shane's hand was next to it, not touching, just there.

They'd boarded at eleven. Ottawa to New York, ninety minutes. Jensen was across the aisle, one row back, reading something on his phone with the posture of a man who was not reading something on his phone. Marie was two rows behind Jensen. She had a paperback open and her eyes moved across the pages at regular intervals, which Ilya had learned was how Marie looked when she was tracking the cabin.

"You want to look at film?" Shane said.

"No."

"We could go over the Admirals' power play. Fred flagged their—"

"Shane."

Shane stopped. Looked at him. The dark eyes, steady, the freckles across the bridge of his nose. Patient. Not by nature — by effort, by the will he applied to everything he decided mattered.

"I am fine," Ilya said.

"Okay."

"I... just don't like flying today."

"You love flying."

"Today I don't like it."

Shane didn't push. He opened his laptop and pulled up game film and angled the screen so Ilya could see it if he wanted. He didn't narrate. He didn't explain. He just sat there, watching the Admirals' breakout patterns, and his presence was the thing — Shane Hollander being calm beside you, doing his work, being in his body, making the space around him organized and safe.

Ilya watched the film without watching it. His eyes tracked the screen but his brain was somewhere over Lake Ontario, running the scenarios Martin had walked them through last night. If the passport holds, you fly, you play, you come home. If Russia moves, we move faster. Emil is ready. The paperwork is drafted. There are no gaps.

There are no gaps.

He watched the Admirals cycle the puck in their offensive zone. Carter Vaughn on the right wing — Scott Hunter's best friend, wearing a C on a team that didn't have Scott anymore. Ilya had played against Vaughn for years. Good player. Hard along the boards. Hit you clean, help you up, hit you again next shift.

Strange, playing New York without Scott. The building would feel different. The bench, the tunnel, the number 21 that wasn't on

anyone's back anymore.

Behind him, Wyatt was explaining that octopuses had three hearts. "Three," Wyatt said. "Three hearts. And blue blood. They're basically aliens."

"Wyatt," Troy said. "Please."

"I'm just saying. If you had three hearts, you'd want people to know."

"I would not," Troy said.

Zane was asleep. Head tilted back, mouth slightly open. Luca was across the aisle with his headphones on, eyes closed, but his foot was tapping — awake. Dykstra and Chouinard were playing cards with Boyle and Tanner. Wiebe was in the front row with Fred Johnson, both quiet, Wiebe reading something on his tablet and Fred writing on his clipboard with the focus of a man who had already moved past whatever today was and into the next drill.

Ilya's phone buzzed.

Galina. Text: *Call me when you land. Not urgent. But call me.*

Not urgent meant urgent in Galina's language. Galina said *not urgent* the way other people said *sit down*.

He put the phone away. Pressed his thumb harder into the cross.

Forty minutes to landing.

Shane's phone lit up at 11:47.

Ilya saw it because he was looking at Shane's hands — not thinking about it, just watching the fingers on the trackpad, the short nails, the ring. Shane's left hand. The band catching the overhead light.

The phone was facedown on the tray table. The screen lit the plastic from beneath. Shane picked it up. Read it.

His face didn't change.

When Shane's face changed, it was for the room. When it didn't change, it was real.

Shane turned the phone toward Ilya.

Martin. One message:

Russia revoked Ilya's passport 20 minutes ago. Already on the wires. Emil is in position. Do not deviate from the plan. I'll call when you land.

Ilya read it twice. Then he locked his phone and put it facedown on his thigh and looked at the seat in front of him.

His passport was revoked.

He was in the air over the United States without valid travel documents.

Thirty minutes from landing in a country that was not his, holding papers from a country that had just declared those papers void. Shane's hand was on his forearm now — not gripping, just there, the thumb against the inside of his wrist where the pulse was. Shane found it and stayed.

"Okay," Shane said. Quiet. Just for Ilya. "Martin's ready. Emil's ready. This is the play we planned for."

"I know."

"We land. We walk off the plane. Emil handles it."

"I know, Shane."

"Okay."

They sat. The plane hummed. Wyatt was still talking about octopuses — something about camouflage now, about how they could change color in milliseconds, about how the skin itself was doing the thinking. Nobody was listening except Boyle, who appeared genuinely interested.

Ilya looked out the window. Below, the ground was getting closer. The suburbs. The highways. The gray-brown sprawl of the approach to New York, the city assembling itself from pieces as the altitude dropped.

Stateless. The word arrived without announcement. He had lived in this country for ten years — drafted here, played here, bled on American ice in two hundred arenas. And now he was thirty minutes from landing in it without a single valid document that said he was allowed to be anywhere at all.

Shane's thumb on his pulse. Steady.

"Don't tell the team," Ilya said.

"I wasn't going to."

"They will know soon enough."

"Yeah."

The captain's voice came over the intercom. Twenty minutes to LaGuardia. Local time 12:35. Temperature fifty-one degrees. Welcome to New York.

The private aviation terminal at LaGuardia was not like the main terminal. No crowds. No lines. A building with glass doors and a desk and a hallway that led to where the buses waited. Charter teams

came through here — in and out, controlled, quiet. The Centaurs had done this a hundred times.

Jensen was off the plane first. He didn't rush — unhurried, scanning, the body relaxed and the eyes doing something the body wasn't advertising. Marie was four people behind him. She had her bag over one shoulder and her phone in her hand and she was texting someone, or appearing to text someone.

Ilya came down the steps into the October air. Cold. Sharper than Ottawa — a different cold, a city cold, the kind that came off concrete and metal instead of trees and river. Shane was beside him. The team was filing off behind them — bags, sticks, the noise of twenty-five men in transit.

The terminal doors opened. Jensen went through first.

And stopped.

Ilya saw Jensen's shoulders change. Not tense — *set*. Jensen's right hand moved to his hip — not reaching for anything, just positioning.

Ilya came through the doors. Shane beside him. And he saw them.

Three men. Suits. Standing near the credential desk, positioned where you'd stand if you wanted to intercept someone coming off a charter and didn't want to look like you were intercepting someone. Two of them were looking directly at Ilya. The third — shorter, younger, standing half a step behind the other two — had his hands clasped in front of him and his eyes were moving around the room. Cataloging exits, threats, the geometry of the space. The handler. The one running this.

The tallest one stepped forward. Dark suit, no tie, a face arranged into professional courtesy. He addressed Ilya in Russian.

"Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov," he said. "We represent the Consulate General of the Russian Federation in New York. We need to speak

with you regarding your travel documentation."

Ilya's body went cold. Not the cold from outside. The cold that started in the hands and moved inward, the one that made the world sharpen at the edges.

"We have been instructed to inform you that your Russian Federation passport has been formally revoked as of eleven hundred hours today," the man continued in Russian. "Your current travel documents are no longer valid. The Consulate has prepared—"

"Excuse me." The second man. In English. Fluent, almost no accent. He stepped forward, addressing Shane, addressing the room. "Mr. Rozanov's travel documents have been revoked by the Russian Federation. He is currently on United States soil without valid documentation. The Consulate General is prepared to assist Mr. Rozanov in resolving this matter and would like to—"

"No," Shane said.

One word. Flat.

"Mr. Hollander, I presume? This is a consular matter between—"

"No."

Jensen moved. Not toward the Russians — between them and Ilya. The positioning was subtle. If you weren't watching for it, you'd think Jensen was just standing there. But Jensen was now between the three suits and the man they'd come for.

And then the team.

Ilya didn't see the moment it started. He didn't see who moved first — Troy, maybe, or Zane, or maybe it was all of them at once. One second Ilya was standing in a terminal with three Russian officials and his husband and his security detail, and the next second he was standing behind a wall of hockey players.

They didn't know. They didn't know about the passport. They didn't know about the revocation or the legal strategy or Emil Lathrop or the emergency motion. They saw suits. They saw Ilya's face. They saw Russian being spoken in a tone that wasn't friendly. And they closed ranks.

Troy was at Shane's shoulder. Zane on the other side. Dykstra. Chouinard. Wyatt, who had stopped talking about octopuses and was now standing at his full height with his bag still over his shoulder and his face set in an expression Ilya had never seen on Wyatt Hayes — which was no expression at all. Luca was behind Ilya — not in front, behind, as though he'd decided that if anyone was coming from the other direction, they were coming through him first.

Dillon. Boyle. LaPointe. The rest, filling in the gaps the way you fill gaps on the ice — not because someone drew it on a whiteboard but because you read the play and you go.

Wiebe was there too. He hadn't pushed to the front. He was standing slightly off to the side with Fred Johnson, and Wiebe's face was doing the thing Wiebe's face did in a third period with the game tied — calm, watchful, taking in the situation and deciding what to do with it. Fred had his clipboard under his arm. His other hand was in his pocket. He looked like a man standing at a bus stop, which was Fred's version of ready.

Harris had his phone out. He was already calling someone. His face was calm and his voice was calm and his hands were steady, and Ilya knew that Harris's hands were only that steady when he was scared and converting the fear into action.

"Gentlemen." The English-speaking Russian. Still calm. Still professional. His smile had not changed, and Ilya noticed this — the smile that stayed. "This is a consular matter. We are not—"

"You're on American soil approaching a foreign national who has legal representation," said a voice from behind the Russians.

Everyone turned.

Two men were coming through a side door. The first was tall — six-one, dark hair, glasses, a navy suit that fit him the way suits fit men who wore them every day and had stopped thinking about it. He was carrying a leather folder. He walked with the certainty of a person who knew where he was going and who he was going to be when he got there.

Behind him: two US federal marshals. Badges visible. Sidearms visible.

"Emil Lathrop," the man said. He didn't offer his hand. He opened the leather folder. "Counsel for Ilya Rozanov. I have here an emergency temporary restraining order issued forty-seven minutes ago by the Honorable Judge Diane Morano, Southern District of New York, granting Mr. Rozanov a ten-day emergency stay of removal and prohibiting any government entity — foreign or domestic — from detaining, removing, or interfering with his freedom of movement within the United States."

The English-speaking Russian opened his mouth.

"I'm not finished," Emil said. The voice was level. Not raised. Not hard. The tone of a man who had spent twelve years in the Southern District and did not need volume to fill a room. "This order applies to the Russian Federation, its consular officers, and its agents. It also applies to the Department of Homeland Security, which I understand has been notified of Mr. Rozanov's passport status."

He looked past the Russians. Toward the hallway behind the credential desk, where — and Ilya had not seen them until this moment — two more figures stood. DHS. The badges, the posture, the windbreakers with the lettering. They'd been waiting. Russia had tipped them, Ilya realized. Revoke the passport, call DHS, let the Americans do the work. A two-sided trap.

Emil had seen them before Ilya had.

"I've spoken with the DHS field office," Emil said, addressing the two agents directly. "Agent Morales has confirmed receipt of the court order. Mr. Rozanov is in full compliance with US law under the emergency stay. He is not to be detained, questioned, or impeded."

One of the DHS agents — shorter, dark-haired, a woman with her credentials on a lanyard — nodded once. She didn't look happy about it. She didn't look unhappy. She looked like a federal agent who had been given a court order and was going to follow it.

The English-speaking Russian looked at Emil. The smile was still there. Smaller now. Tighter.

"Mr. Lathrop. The Russian Federation does not recognize—"

"The Russian Federation doesn't need to recognize anything. Judge Morano does. And Judge Morano has spoken." Emil closed the folder. "Your consulate is welcome to file an objection through proper diplomatic channels. In the meantime, Mr. Rozanov will be leaving this terminal with his team, his counsel, and his security detail. If any representative of the Russian Federation attempts to contact, follow, or approach Mr. Rozanov during the duration of this order, I will file a contempt motion before you reach the Midtown Tunnel."

Quiet.

The terminal was very quiet. Twenty-five hockey players. Three Russian officials. Two DHS agents. Two federal marshals. A lawyer with a folder. And Ilya, standing behind a wall of his teammates, his thumb pressed so hard into the cross that he could feel the shape of it through his shirt, through the chain, through the skin.

The young one — the one in the back, the one Ilya had pegged as the handler — swallowed. His hands were no longer clasped. They were at his sides. His left hand was opening and closing. His right hand had a slight tremor.

He was scared.

Ilya looked at him and understood, suddenly, that he'd been wrong. The young one wasn't the handler. He was a junior attaché who'd been told to come to an airport and stand behind two senior officials and was now standing in front of federal marshals in a country that wasn't his, realizing that the job description had not covered this. The actual play-caller was the one with the smile. The English-speaker. The one whose smile hadn't moved once during the entire exchange, because the smile wasn't a response. It was a position.

The English-speaker looked at Ilya. Directly. Past the team, past Jensen, past Shane.

"*Udachi*, Ilya Grigoryevich," he said. *Good luck.*

The three of them left. The DHS agents stayed for another moment — the woman exchanged a look with Emil, brief, professional — and then they left too.

The terminal was just a terminal again.

Emil turned to them. He adjusted his glasses — quick, automatic, the gesture of a man who'd probably been up since early morning and was now standing in front of a professional hockey team at LaGuardia.

"Mr. Rozanov," he said. He extended his hand.

Ilya took it. Firm. Dry.

"Emil Lathrop. Martin Sotto briefed me on your case. You're covered for ten days. The stay prohibits detention, removal, or interference by any government entity on US soil. After that, you're back in Canada, where you're protected under the asylum filing."

"Thank you," Ilya said.

"Don't thank me yet. Thank me when we get you to the hotel without anyone else showing up." He looked at Jensen. "You're security?"

Jensen nodded.

"Good. I've got a car outside. Follow the marshals. We go straight to the hotel. No stops, no statements, no press."

"Press already knows," Harris said. He was looking at his phone. "AP has the passport revocation. CBC is running it. ESPN alert went out three minutes ago."

"Then we move," Emil said.

They moved.

Ilya walked through the terminal surrounded by his teammates. Not behind them anymore — with them. Zane on one side, Troy on the other, Shane in front, Jensen ahead of Shane, Marie behind Ilya. A formation that no one had planned and no one had practiced and that worked anyway.

Wyatt fell into step beside him. Quiet. Then: "So. The octopus thing."

"Wyatt."

"Three hearts. One for the body, two for the gills. I'm just saying. Redundancy is important. Backup systems."

Ilya looked at him. Wyatt's face was doing something it didn't usually do. The comic-nerd energy was still there, the mouth ready to say the next thing. But underneath it, in the eyes, was something else. Something steady.

"Wyatt," Ilya said.

"Yeah."

"Thank you."

"For what, the octopus facts? I've got more. Did you know they can taste with their arms? Every sucker has—"

"Wyatt."

"Yeah. Okay. You're welcome."

They walked out of the terminal. The October air hit Ilya's face — cold, sharp, the exhaust and concrete of New York — and he breathed it and it tasted like nothing and it tasted like everything.

The bus ride to the hotel was twenty-five minutes. Jensen sat in the front. Marie at the back. Emil had his own car — he'd follow, check them in, brief Shane and Ilya privately. The marshals were gone. The DHS agents were gone. The Russians were gone.

The team was not gone.

The bus was quiet for the first three minutes, which was longer than Ilya had ever heard a team bus be quiet. Then Dykstra said, "So," and Chouinard said, "Yeah," and then nobody said anything for another minute.

"Passport," Shane said. He addressed the bus evenly, clearly, without drama. "Russia revoked Ilya's passport while we were in the air. The people at the airport were from the Russian consulate. They were there to grab him."

"And the other ones?" Troy said. "The ones by the hallway."

"DHS. Russia tipped them that Ilya was landing without valid documents."

The bus absorbed this.

"The lawyer — Emil Lathrop — has a court order. Emergency stay. Ten days of protection on US soil. After that, we're home. Martin has

the rest."

"So Ilya's okay," Zane said.

"Ilya's okay."

"Ilya is right here," Ilya said. "Can speak for self."

"Are you okay, Captain?" Luca said, from three rows back. The Swiss accent. The seriousness.

"Am okay, Luca."

Luca nodded. "I am glad."

Wiebe stood up in the front of the bus. He didn't need to call for quiet — the bus was already quiet, had been quiet since the terminal, the particular silence of men who had just stood between their captain and three foreign officials without being asked and were still processing what that meant.

"We play tomorrow," Wiebe said. Not a question. "Whatever happened at that airport, whatever's on the news, whatever's outside the hotel — we play tomorrow. That's what this team does."

He looked at Ilya.

"Captain's playing. So we're playing."

Fred Johnson was in the seat behind Wiebe. He had his clipboard out and he was writing something on it with the focus of a man who had already moved past the crisis and into the next drill. He looked up at Ilya. Adjusted his glasses. Went back to the clipboard.

It was the most comforting thing anyone had done on the bus.

"I have a question," Wyatt said.

"Wyatt, I swear to God—" Zane started.

"Is Ilya still playing tomorrow?"

"Wiebe just said that," Dykstra said.

"I wanted to hear it from the Cap."

Everyone looked at Ilya.

Ilya looked at Shane. Shane looked back. The dark eyes. Steady.

"Yes," Ilya said. "I am playing tomorrow."

The bus exhaled. Not all at once — in pieces, one person and then another, the tension releasing in sequence.

"Good," Wyatt said. "Because I've been working on a new thing with my pads and I need you to see it. It's inspired by the Winter Soldier arm. The way he catches the shield? I've been trying to—"

"Wyatt," said six people.

Wyatt stopped. Grinned.

Ilya leaned his head against the window. The glass was cold. New York moved past — highway, buildings, the skyline assembling itself in the distance. He'd been coming to this city for road games since he was eighteen. America had been his home for ten years — Boston first, the apartment in Brookline with the wrong-textured tvorog and the grocery store on the corner, then Ottawa with Shane. And now he was riding through New York City without a single document that said he was allowed to be here.

Shane's hand was on his knee. Not squeezing. Resting. The ring against Ilya's leg through his pants.

He closed his eyes. Pressed the cross.

The hotel was midtown. Glass and marble and a lobby that smelled like whatever hotels pumped through their ventilation to make people feel like they belonged. The team filed in through a side entrance — Harris had called ahead, arranged the route, done the thing Harris did where the world bent around his logistics.

Press was already outside. Three satellite trucks. Camera crews at the main entrance. Someone had leaked the flight number, or the hotel, or both. The side entrance was clear.

They checked in. Emil was in the lobby, talking to someone on his phone in a voice too low to hear. He saw Ilya and held up one finger. *One minute.*

Harris handled the room assignments. The team scattered to their floors. Jensen took the room to the left of Shane and Ilya's suite. Marie took the right.

Shane opened the suite door. Standard road suite — living room, bedroom, the mini-fridge nobody used because team nutritionists had opinions, the window with a view of midtown that Ilya didn't look at.

He sat on the couch. Just sat. His hands on his knees. The cross at his sternum.

Shane sat next to him. Close. Their shoulders touching.

"Emil's coming up in ten minutes," Shane said.

"Okay."

"Harris is handling the press. The team's not making statements. League office is putting out a release from the Commissioner."

"Okay."

Quiet.

"Ilya."

"What."

"Look at me."

Ilya looked. Shane's face was close. The dark eyes — not soft. Shane's eyes were never soft when he was serious. They were clear. Direct.

"You're okay," Shane said.

"Am in New York. Passport is gone. Russia sent men to airport. DHS was waiting. Am sitting in hotel room in country that is not mine with court order that expires in ten days and game tomorrow against team that used to have Scott Hunter on it. I don't know if my brother and his family are alive. My mother is dead. And my father... he's dead, too."

He stopped. His jaw was tight.

"But I am fine, Shane. I am fine."

His voice cracked on the second *fine*. Not much. A fissure. The word coming out with a split in it he hadn't put there.

Shane didn't flinch. Didn't soften. He held Ilya's eyes and said:

"Russia can only take you from me if I'm dead. I need you to understand that. I will fight the world to protect you. You are mine and no one — not Russia, not your Uncle Vova — will take you away from me. I have fought for you too hard, for far too long. You and I only belong to each other."

Ilya's throat closed. Not a fissure this time. The whole thing. The muscles in his neck seizing, the breath stopping, the words piling up behind the blockage.

Shane didn't look away. He didn't touch Ilya's face or hold his hand or do any of the things that would have given Ilya permission to fall apart. He just looked at him. Held him with the look.

"Say it back," Shane said.

"Shane—"

"Say it."

"We belong to each other."

"Again."

"We belong to each other."

Shane nodded. Once.

He got up. Went to Ilya's bag. Came back with the pill case — the small one, the travel one, the blue plastic rectangle that Galina had told him to carry everywhere and that Shane tracked with the same precision he tracked line combinations.

"Did you take your meds today?"

Ilya tried to remember. The morning. The hotel in Ottawa, the car to the airport, the boarding. He'd opened his bag and then Jensen had said something and he'd closed it.

"No," Ilya said.

"I know you didn't."

Shane opened the pill case and shook out the antidepressant — the small white one, the one Ilya had been on for two years, the one Galina had adjusted twice, the one that didn't fix anything but kept the floor from dropping out. Shane handed him a water from the minibar. Ilya took the pill. Swallowed.

Shane watched him swallow. Then he set the glass on the nightstand and went to his own bag. Came back with a different pill — not from Ilya's case. From his. Shane's. The small orange one that Shane carried for the bad days, the days when the anxiety made his hands shake and his jaw lock and his brain run the scenarios until the scenarios ate the day.

Shane had taken them maybe a dozen times in the years Ilya had known him. He did not offer them. He did not talk about them. They lived in a pocket of his travel bag and Ilya knew they were there the way he knew Shane's blood type and shoe size and the sound he made when he was asleep and dreaming about hockey.

"Take this," Shane said.

"That's yours."

"I know whose it is."

"Shane, I cannot take your—"

"You can. You're going to. Because you need to sleep and your body is not going to let you sleep tonight without help, and I need you to sleep because you're playing a hockey game in eighteen hours and I need you on that ice."

Ilya looked at the pill.

"Is this an emergency?" Ilya said.

"Yes."

Ilya took it. Swallowed it dry. Shane handed him the water anyway. Ilya drank.

"Now listen to me," Shane said. He sat beside Ilya on the bed. Their shoulders touching. "From right now until we fly home, there are only two things you think about. Me. And hockey. That's it. Not Russia.

Not the passport. Not the consulate. Not the press. Not Alexei. Not your father. Not the court order. Me and hockey."

"Shane and hockey," Ilya said.

"That's it."

"Is not a bad life."

"It's the only life. Everything else — Martin handles it. Emil handles it. Harris handles the press. Jensen and Marie handle security. You and I handle the ice."

A knock. Jensen's pattern — two, pause, one.

"Emil's here," Jensen said through the door.

Shane got up. Opened it. Emil came in. He'd taken off his jacket, sleeves rolled to the forearms, glasses slightly crooked, as though he'd been rubbing his eyes in the elevator.

He sat in the chair across from the couch. Opened his folder. Looked at Ilya.

"Here's where we are," Emil said. "The emergency stay is solid. Judge Morano is former SDNY herself — she doesn't issue stays she can't defend. Ten days. In that window, no one touches you. You play, you practice, you move freely within the United States."

"And after ten days?" Ilya said.

"You're on a plane back to Ottawa, where Martin's got you covered under the asylum filing and the Canadian courts. The ten days is the bridge. Martin built the Canadian side. I built the American side. The bridge holds."

"The Russians at the airport," Shane said. He was standing by the window with his arms crossed. "They knew the flight. They knew the gate."

"Russian consulates track their nationals. Especially nationals who've been declared enemies of the state. They had the charter tail number — that's semi-public information for private aviation. They were there before you were."

"And DHS?"

"Russia tipped them. Smart play — revoke the passport, then notify US authorities that an undocumented Russian national is about to land at LaGuardia. Let the Americans do the detention, Russia does the paperwork. Keeps their hands clean."

"But you had the stay before we landed," Shane said.

"I filed the emergency motion at oh-nine-hundred this morning. Before Russia revoked the passport. Martin and I built this contingency two weeks ago. The motion was sitting in the system. When Russia moved, I activated it. Judge Morano signed at eleven-thirteen. Russia didn't revoke until eleven hundred — I had the stay thirteen minutes after they pulled the trigger."

Ilya looked at him. "You were faster."

"Martin told me to be faster. So I was faster."

Shane exhaled. Just slightly.

"What happens with the press?" Shane said.

"That's your communications guy's problem, not mine. From a legal standpoint, no statements from Ilya. If reporters approach — and they will — the answer is 'no comment, speak to my counsel.' I'll take media questions through my office."

Another knock. Harris — quick, efficient, three.

Shane opened the door. Harris came in. Phone in hand, tie loosened, the look of a man who had been doing three things simultaneously for forty-five minutes and was about to do a fourth.

"Front entrance is a circus," Harris said. "Eight camera crews, two print, AP and Reuters are both running it as breaking news. I've got hotel security blocking the lobby. They tried to get someone in through the service entrance — a guy with a camera in a catering uniform. Security caught him."

"How?" Shane said.

"The uniform didn't fit and he was carrying a Canon 5D in a bread basket. It wasn't their best work."

"Statements?"

"League office is issuing from the Commissioner in twenty minutes. Strong language — condemnation of Russia's actions, full support for Ilya, the league's legal team coordinating with Martin and Emil. I'm drafting a team statement. Short. 'We're in New York to play hockey. Ilya Rozanov is a member of this team and will be on the ice tomorrow. No further comment.'"

"Good," Shane said.

"One more thing." Harris looked at Ilya. "Kip Grady called me. Scott and Kip want to come to the game tomorrow. Scott wants to know if that's okay with you."

Scott Hunter. Number 21. The first active NHL captain to come out. The man who had kissed Kip at center ice before Shane and Ilya had kissed at center ice. The man whose retirement had left a space in New York that Carter Vaughn was still trying to fill.

Scott was asking permission.

"Tell him yes," Ilya said. "Tell him — yes."

Harris nodded. Left.

Emil stood. Buttoned his cuffs. Put his jacket back on.

"Get some sleep," he said. "Both of you. I'm at the Marriott across the street. My phone is on. Martin's phone is on. If anything happens between now and tomorrow — anything — you call. Not text. Call."

He shook Ilya's hand. Shook Shane's. Left.

The door closed.

The suite was quiet. The ugly couch, the midtown view, the hum of the building's ventilation. Somewhere below, camera crews were pointing their lenses at a hotel that contained a man whose country had just disowned him, and hotel security was telling them to leave, and they were leaving but they would come back.

"Bed," Shane said.

"Shane."

"Bed."

Ilya let himself be steered. The pill was already pulling — or his body was pulling, the exhaustion that had been running underneath everything since June finally finding a crack to pour through. His eyelids were heavy. His hands were warm. The sharpness that had been in everything since the text on the plane was going soft at the edges.

Shane pulled the comforter down. Ilya lay back. The pillow was hotel-cold against his neck, unfamiliar.

Shane's hand was on his chest. Over the cross. Pressing it against his sternum the way Ilya pressed it himself.

"Shane and hockey," Shane said. "That's all there is. Everything else is someone else's job. You go to sleep and when you wake up, it's me and the game and nothing else."

"Shane and hockey," Ilya said. His voice was thick. Far away.

"That's it."

"Stay."

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm right here."

Ilya closed his eyes. Shane's hand on his chest. The weight of it. The ring against Ilya's skin through the shirt. The city outside the window, the noise a hum now, the sound of a place that didn't care about him but was letting him stay.

He slept.

Shane didn't sleep.

He sat on the couch in the living room of the suite with his laptop open and his phone charging and the light from the screen painting the room blue. Martin called at nine. They talked for forty minutes. The contingencies were holding. The Canadian courts had been notified of the revocation.

Melinda was accelerating the citizenship timeline — the Minister's office had called her, not the other way around. The enemy-of-state designation plus the airport confrontation plus the passport revocation was, in Martin's words, "the strongest asylum case I've ever seen. They're building it for us."

Shane wrote everything down. The legal pad. The pen. The handwriting that would be illegible to anyone who wasn't Shane, containing in its tight compressed lines the architecture of his husband's survival.

He checked on Ilya at ten. Asleep. The big body on its side, one arm under the pillow, the other arm extended across the empty half of the bed. The cross had come loose from the shirt collar. Shane could see it against Ilya's neck — the gold, the chain, the small shape that held his mother.

He went back to the couch.

At ten-thirty, a knock. Not Jensen's pattern. Not Emil's.

Shane opened the door.

Harris. But different — no phone in his hand, no tie, no urgency. He was holding a book. Hardcover. New. The dust jacket was white with a drawing on the front — two hockey sticks crossed on the ice, blades touching, a pair of skates blurred in the background.

"This came to the front desk," Harris said. "Addressed to Ilya. There's a note."

He handed it over. Shane looked at the cover.

Love and Hockey by Christopher Grady.

Shane's chest did something. Not a beat — a recognition. Christopher Grady. *Kip*. Scott Hunter's husband. The man who'd been a secret for years, stashed in Scott's New York condo while Scott was on the road on away games. The man who'd survived the exposure and the fallout and the public eye and had come out the other side married to the most famous gay athlete in North American sports history.

Kip had written a book.

Shane opened the cover. A note on hotel stationery, tucked inside the front page. The handwriting was neat, small, precise.

Ilya —

Scott and I will be at the game tomorrow. This came out last month. I wrote most of it during the years when nobody knew about us. I thought you might want it tonight.

You're not alone. You were never alone.

— Kip

Shane closed the book. Held it.

"Thanks," he said to Harris.

Harris nodded. Looked at Shane for a moment — the look Harris gave when he wanted to say something he'd already decided not to say — and then went back to the room he probably shared with Troy.

Shane closed the door. Went to the bedroom. Set the book on Ilya's nightstand, next to the water glass, next to the pill case, where Ilya would see it when he opened his eyes.

He stood there. His husband asleep in a hotel room in New York. A country that was not theirs. A city that had tried to take him six hours ago. A court order holding the door. A hockey game tomorrow. A book from a man who had been where they were and had survived it and had written it down.

Shane took off his shoes. Got into bed. Ilya's arm — the one extended across the empty side — found him immediately. Asleep, unconscious, the body knowing before the brain that the person it was waiting for had arrived. The arm pulled Shane in. Ilya made a sound that wasn't a word.

Shane let himself be pulled.

He lay in the dark. Ilya's breathing deep and slow against his neck. Tomorrow was the game. Tomorrow was Scott Hunter in the stands and Carter Vaughn and the Admirals on the ice and the press outside and the court order ticking down. Tomorrow was hockey.

Tonight was this.

Shane closed his eyes. Held on. Fell into dreamless sleep.

Shane

Chapter 16: Shane

A book on a nightstand. A phone call Shane wasn't meant to hear. A game in a building that belongs to someone else now. And in a restaurant in the West Village, four men who know what it costs sit at a table and eat bread and talk about pizza and crying and the things you write down to prove they're real.

The morning of the game, Ilya found the book.

Shane was in the bathroom brushing his teeth when he heard the silence — the quality of silence that meant Ilya had stopped moving, which Ilya almost never did. Ilya was always in motion. His hands, his feet, the restless current of a body that had been built for a sport played at thirty miles an hour and didn't know how to idle. When Ilya went still, something had landed.

Shane came out. Ilya was sitting on the edge of the bed in his boxers, the hardcover open in his hands. He was reading the note. His thumb was on the page, not on the cross — on the page, on Kip's handwriting, holding it down like it might leave.

He looked up at Shane.

"When did this come?" Ilya said.

"Last night. Harris brought it up."

Ilya looked at the cover. *Love and Hockey* by Christopher Grady. He turned it over in his hands. Read the back. Turned it over again. There was something in his face — not surprise, not exactly.

Recognition. The look of a man encountering a thing he didn't know existed but that answered a question he'd been carrying.

"Kip wrote a book," Ilya said.

"Yeah."

"About him and Scott."

"During the years nobody knew."

Ilya set it on the nightstand. Put his hand flat on the cover and left it there, the way you put your hand on something to confirm it's real. His palm over Christopher Grady's name. His ring against the white dust jacket.

"I will read it on the plane," Ilya said.

"Okay."

"Shane."

"Yeah."

"Thank you for putting it where I would see it."

Shane nodded. He leaned against the doorframe with his toothbrush still in his hand and watched Ilya look at the book for another few seconds, the hazel eyes focused, the jaw relaxed in a way it hadn't been relaxed since the charter yesterday.

Then Ilya stood up and went to the bathroom and the day started, and Shane put his toothbrush back in the travel case and zipped it closed and thought about Kip Grady writing alone in a condo in New York while the man he loved played hockey in buildings full of people who didn't know he existed.

Shane went downstairs at ten to meet Harris about the pregame media protocol. Harris had his list — credential approvals, podium schedule, the overnight coverage. The Commissioner's statement had landed hard. CNN had picked it up. The New York Times had a sidebar about transnational repression and professional athletes. Harris was managing it with caffeine and competence and the will that Harris brought to crises, which was the same will Harris brought to everything, calibrated upward.

They talked for twenty minutes in a corner of the hotel restaurant. Harris ate a bagel. Shane drank coffee and took notes on his phone. When they were done, Shane went back upstairs.

He opened the suite door quietly. His hand on the knob, the slow turn, the push — the habit of entering rooms carefully that he'd developed over the last four months, ever since the shooting, ever since the world outside their house had become something that could follow you inside.

Ilya was on the bed. On his back. Phone to his ear. His eyes were closed. His free hand was on his chest, over the cross, the thumb pressing the gold through the cotton of his t-shirt.

Galina.

Shane stopped in the doorway. He could hear Ilya's side — the low voice, the Russian-accented English that thickened when Ilya was tired or emotional or both, which right now was both.

"I am tired," Ilya was saying. "Not from the flight. Not from the airport. From carrying it. All of it. The passport, the case, the team, the press. Russia. My brother who does not call. My mother who is dead. My father who—"

He stopped.

Shane stood in the doorway. He should leave. Galina was Ilya's — the one room in Ilya's life that Shane didn't organize, didn't manage,

didn't enter. The space where Ilya put the things he couldn't put anywhere else. Shane respected that room. He'd never listened at the door.

He was listening now.

"I feel like I am holding everything above my head," Ilya said, "and my arms are shaking and if I put it down it will crush me."

Shane's hand tightened on the doorframe. His knuckles went white. He felt it in his sternum — the physical impact of hearing Ilya say the thing that Ilya never said, the admission that the weight was too much, spoken to Galina because Galina was the person Ilya could say it to without worrying that the person hearing it would break.

Shane was the person Ilya worried about breaking.

He knew that. He'd known it for years — the way Ilya edited himself around Shane, softened the worst of it, translated the Russian despair into English inconvenience. *Am fine. Am okay. Just tired*. The shield Ilya held up so that Shane wouldn't carry the full weight of what was behind it.

And here was the full weight, spoken into a phone, spoken to a woman Ilya paid to hear the truth.

"I am captain," Ilya said. "I hold things. Is what I do."

Galina's voice through the phone. Shane couldn't make out the words — only the rhythm, steady, unhurried. A woman who chose language the way a surgeon chose tools.

Ilya was quiet for a while. Listening. His hand on the cross, his eyes closed, his body still on the hotel bed in a way Shane rarely saw — the stillness of a man who had put down the performance and was just lying in his own exhaustion.

"He gave me his anxiety pill last night," Ilya said. "So I could sleep."

A pause.

"Yes. It helped."

Another pause. Longer. Whatever Galina was saying, it was reaching the place where the armor was thinnest.

"Okay," Ilya said. His voice had dropped. Quieter. "Okay. After all of it. After I am home."

A beat. Then: "Yes."

He hung up. Lay on the bed with his eyes closed. The phone facedown on the mattress beside him. His hand still on the cross. The October light through the hotel window falling across his legs, his stomach, the t-shirt that was Shane's — a Centaurs training camp shirt, too small for Ilya, stretched tight across the chest and shoulders, which Ilya wore to sleep in because it smelled like Shane and because Ilya was sentimental about things he would deny being sentimental about until his last day on earth.

He opened his eyes. Saw Shane in the doorway.

They looked at each other.

"You heard," Ilya said. Not a question.

"Some of it."

"I called Galina."

"I know."

Ilya sat up. Swung his legs over the edge of the bed. His hands on his knees. The posture of a man deciding whether to open a door or close it.

Shane waited. He didn't cross the room. He didn't sit down. He stood in the doorway and waited, because this was Ilya's door and Ilya had

to be the one to open it.

Ilya opened it.

"She said it is important to let someone in when everything feels like too much. That I don't have to hold it all. That I was never meant to hold it all."

Shane came into the room. Slowly. Sat on the bed beside him. Not touching — close, but not touching. Giving Ilya the space to say the rest.

"She said if I feel I cannot go on, just reach up a hand. Just reach up a hand and someone will come along to take it."

Ilya looked at Shane.

"She said that someone is always you."

Shane's throat went tight. The muscles in his neck, the hinge of his jaw, the place behind his eyes. He didn't trust himself to speak. Not because the words weren't there — because there were too many of them, crowding the exit, and if he opened his mouth they would come out in the wrong order and Shane Hollander did not say things in the wrong order. He organized. He structured. He built the sentence in his head before he let it into the world.

But this wasn't a sentence. This was Ilya sitting on a hotel bed telling him that his therapist had said Shane's name as the answer to the question of who would save him, and Shane didn't have a structure for that.

He took Ilya's hand. The left hand. The ring hand. He held it.

"She said I let you in when I am too tired to fight it," Ilya said. "She said the letting in that matters is when I am strong enough to say no and I say yes instead."

"Are you saying yes?"

"I am saying yes, Shane."

Shane brought Ilya's hand to his mouth. Kissed the ring. Not quick — slow, his lips against the warm metal, the band he'd put on Ilya's finger on the best day of his life. He kissed it and held it there and felt the pulse underneath, the blood moving through Ilya's hand, the proof that the man beside him was alive and here and choosing to let him in.

Ilya's other hand came up. Found the back of Shane's neck. The fingers in his hair — gentle, the way Ilya touched him when the walls were down, when the performance was off, when it was just the two of them in a room and the room was the whole world.

Shane leaned into him. Forehead against Ilya's temple. The smell of him — hotel soap and sleep and underneath it the thing that was just Ilya, the scent that Shane could find in a dark room, that lived in the shirts Ilya stole and the pillow on Ilya's side of the bed and the space between Ilya's neck and shoulder where Shane put his face when the day was over and the door was closed.

"I heard what you said to Galina," Shane said. "About the weight. About your arms shaking."

"Shane—"

"No. Listen. You don't have to hold it above your head. You don't have to hold it at all. That's what Martin is for. That's what Emil is for. That's what the whole team standing in front of you at an airport is for." He pulled back. Looked at Ilya's face. The hazel eyes, the dark eyebrows, the stubble that was two days past the point where Ilya usually shaved because Ilya hadn't been thinking about shaving because Ilya had been thinking about survival. "Your job is to play hockey and let me love you. That's the whole list."

Ilya's mouth moved. The lopsided mouth, the one that Shane had spent fourteen years memorizing. It didn't form a word. It formed something else — the beginning of a smile, or the end of something

that had been holding, the small release of a man who had been bracing and was being told he could stop.

"Is short list," Ilya said.

"It's the only list."

"Play hockey. Let Shane love me."

"That's it."

"What is on your list?"

"Same thing. Reversed."

Ilya kissed him. Not the kiss from last night — not the bedtime kiss, not the comfort kiss. This was the other one. The one that started slow and opened, Ilya's mouth against his, the hand on the back of Shane's neck pulling him closer, the heat of it building from the place where their lips met into Shane's chest, his stomach, the base of his spine. Ilya kissed him like a man who had decided to stop holding everything and start holding one thing, and the one thing was Shane.

Shane's hand was on Ilya's chest. Over the cross. He could feel Ilya's heart under his palm — the beat of it, fast, alive. His other hand was still holding Ilya's left hand, the ring between their fingers, the metal warm from both of them.

They kissed on the edge of a hotel bed in midtown Manhattan at ten-thirty in the morning with a hockey game in six hours and a court order ticking and the world outside the window doing what it did. They kissed until the kissing became something else — not sex, not here, not now, but the thing adjacent to it, the territory between comfort and desire where the body said *I need you* and meant all the ways a person could need another person at once.

Ilya pulled back. His forehead against Shane's. His breathing uneven. The hazel eyes close, so close Shane could see the flecks

of gold in them, the variations he'd been cataloging for years without ever finishing the inventory.

"I love you," Ilya said. In English. He usually said it in Russian — *ya tebya lyublyu* — the way the language of origin carried the weight better, the way the Russian made it older, truer. But this time he said it in English, and Shane understood that this was the choice. English was Shane's language. Ilya was meeting him where he lived.

"I love you," Shane said.

They sat there. Foreheads touching. Breathing.

"Game in six hours," Shane said.

"Yes."

"We should eat."

"Yes."

Neither of them moved.

Pregame.

The visiting locker room at Madison Square Garden was smaller than home — tighter, the stalls closer together, the ceiling lower. Every road barn had its own shape and MSG's said *you are not welcome here and we enjoy that.* Shane had been playing here since he was nineteen. The ceiling still bothered him.

Ilya was in his stall. Taping his stick. The ritual — the Cyrillic on the blade, *solnyshko*, the letters nobody could read. Then the chain. The ring off his hand. He kissed it and threaded it onto the chain next to the cross. Clasped. Tucked under the base layer.

He looked up at Shane.

Shane crossed the room. Leaned down. The grip on the back of Ilya's helmet, pulling him close. Their faces six inches apart. The locker room around them — twenty-plus men getting dressed, the sound of tape and sticks and voices — and Shane and Ilya in the middle of it, as close to alone as you can be in a room full of people.

"There is nothing in your world right now but me and hockey," Shane said. Quiet. For Ilya only. "Shane and hockey. That's it."

The hazel eyes on his. The tired underneath, and the resolve underneath the tired, and the love underneath the resolve.

"Shane and hockey," Ilya said.

"Good."

Shane went back to his stall. Wrote YUNA on the blade. Taped his hands — left first, then right, then the stick. The room filled in around him. Troy with his earbuds, EDM leaking. Zane with the Tupperware — jerk chicken, Cassie's, the smell filling the visiting room the way it filled the home room, because Zane Boodram's pregame ritual traveled. Wyatt arranging his pads in the order that was non-negotiable and that had been non-negotiable since his first NHL game and that would be non-negotiable until his last. Luca quiet in his stall, eyes closed, foot tapping.

Dykstra and Chouinard taping side by side. The blue line partnership. Boyle lacing his skates with the precision of a man who'd been lacing skates for twenty years and still checked the tension twice. Tanner stretching in the corner, headphones on, in his own world.

Wiebe came in. Fred behind him. The clipboard. The glasses. Fred adjusted the glasses — the push at the bridge with his index finger, the gesture he did before every pregame talk and after every period and at every practice and probably in his sleep.

"New York," Wiebe said. "Their building. Their crowd. Their energy. We don't match it. We redirect it. We play our systems, we win our battles, and we make them play our game. Sixty minutes."

Fred put a diagram on the whiteboard. Three X's, two arrows. Shane read it instantly — the forecheck adjustment, the weak-side pressure. Fred drew the way he thought: spare, precise, no wasted lines.

Wiebe looked at Ilya. "Captain."

Ilya stood. The room went quiet.

"Is road game," Ilya said. "Is their building, their crowd. We don't care. We have played in louder. We have played in harder." He looked around the room. Every face. The men who had stood in front of him at an airport twenty hours ago without being asked. "We play our game. Together."

He tapped his chest. The cross. The ring. The chain holding both of them against his sternum.

"Together," the room said back.

Shane looked up at the stands during warmups. Section 108. Row twelve.

Scott Hunter was there. Tall, even sitting down — the frame of a man who had played center for fifteen years and hadn't learned how to make himself smaller. Dark hair. He was leaning forward, elbows on knees, watching the ice with the intensity of a man who hadn't figured out how to watch hockey without wanting to be on it.

Kip was beside him. Smaller. Glasses. A scarf — dark green, wound twice around his neck, the kind of scarf that a person chose carefully because the choosing mattered. He was sitting back in his seat, his hand on Scott's arm, and he wasn't watching the ice. He was

watching Scott watch the ice. The look on his face was private — the quiet attention of a person who had memorized the person beside them and still found new things to notice.

They were together the way Shane and Ilya were together. The way that was obvious to anyone paying attention and invisible to anyone who wasn't. The hand on the arm. The lean. The space between their shoulders that was smaller than the space between anyone else's shoulders.

Shane took his lap. Skated past section 108. Didn't look up again.

The Admirals came out hard.

Carter Vaughn was wearing the C. Shane had heard it might happen — the captaincy, the letter passing from Scott to his best friend — but seeing it was different. Vaughn was the same player. Six-one, fast, the work ethic of a man who'd spent his career next to the best player in the building and had learned to be excellent in the shadow. But the C was new on his chest and the crowd roared for him, and it was a different sound than the sound they'd made for Scott, because Scott was beloved and Vaughn was respected and those were not the same roar.

The first period was ugly.

Shane felt it in the first shift — the half-second delay, the reads that were almost right. The airport was in the team's legs. The terminal. The suits. Twenty-five men had watched three Russian officials try to take their captain, and the body holds things the brain tells it to let go of.

Zane was a beat behind on the forecheck. Troy was pinching early — something Troy hadn't done since October of last season, the old Toronto habit resurfacing under stress. Dykstra was physical but slow to transition, getting caught flat twice in the neutral zone.

The Admirals scored first. Vaughn. Right circle. Wrist shot through traffic — Dykstra screened Wyatt, and by the time Wyatt picked up the release, the puck was past his glove. The building erupted. Vaughn pumped his fist once, controlled, the celebration of a captain in his own barn, and the eighteen thousand people in MSG let him know they'd been waiting for this.

1-0 New York.

Shane won the next faceoff. Pushed the puck back to Dykstra, who hit Ilya on the right wall. Ilya drove wide. Matti Jalo stepped up — big, Finnish, played defense like he was building a stone wall one shift at a time — and took the body. Ilya bounced off him. Came back. Got the puck, cycled it low, found Troy cutting to the net. Troy's shot hit the post. The ping echoed through the building like a struck bell.

The rest of the first was the same — Ottawa generating chances that didn't finish, New York converting on efficiency. The horn sounded with Shane's legs heavy and his jaw tight and the scoreboard reading 1-0 in letters that were thirty feet tall.

Between periods, Fred had the whiteboard. The magnets, the arrows. New York was collapsing early on their penalty kill — the half-wall was open if Shane could get the puck to Ilya in the bumper fast enough for Ilya to make the read.

"Haas," Fred said. "Gagnon is pinching again. Same play as Montreal. If you get behind him—"

"I know," Luca said. Quiet. Ready.

Shane looked at Ilya across the room. Ilya was drinking water, staring at the floor. His jaw was working. But his eyes were here — in the room, on the game. Not at the airport. Not at the terminal. Shane and hockey. The instruction was holding.

Second period. Better. The legs loosened. The reads sharpened. Shane could feel the team finding itself — the way a team does, not all at once but in pieces, one good shift leading to another, the rhythm returning.

Shane tied it on the power play. Fred's setup — Shane at the half-wall, Ilya in the bumper, Luca on the right flank. Shane moved the puck to Ilya. Ilya held it. The Admirals' box collapsed toward him — because when Ilya Rozanov had the puck in the slot, you collapsed or you died. Ilya slid it back to Shane. The lane was there — the space between Jalo's stick and the post. Shane shot. Wrist shot, low, quick release, through Andersson's five-hole. Andersson kicked at it and missed.

The building went quiet. Not silent — MSG was never silent — but the volume dropped, and in that drop Shane could hear his own breathing and Ilya's fist hitting his glove and the sound of eighteen thousand people recalculating.

The rest of the second was a grind. Board battles along the wall. Neutral zone traps. Vaughn everywhere — forechecking, backchecking, killing penalties, the kind of performance that said *this is my building now, this is my team now, this is who I am without the man who made me.* Shane respected it. He'd spent his own career next to Ilya and he understood what it was to be excellent beside greatness and then have to be excellent alone.

Third period. Tied. The ice shrinking. Every puck battle contested, every lane closed, the game tightening the way games tighten when both teams are tired and want it and know that the next goal is the last goal.

Luca scored at 14:22.

Chouinard stretch pass from the Ottawa blue line. Luca took it in stride, blew past the Admirals' defenseman — the speed, the confidence, the twenty-three-year-old who had spent the summer

growing into the player he was going to be for the next decade. He cut to the net, drew Jalo wide, and slipped the puck to Zane at the back post. Zane's stick was already there. He buried it — a tap, clean, the puck hitting the back of the net with the sound that made everything else disappear.

2-1 Ottawa. Five minutes and thirty-eight seconds left.

The last five minutes were survival. The Admirals threw everything. Pulled Andersson with ninety seconds left — six attackers, the ice tilted, bodies in front of Wyatt. Vaughn fired from the point. Wyatt got a pad on it. Cale Wagner jammed the rebound. Wyatt covered it with his glove. Shane blocked a shot from the circle with his shin and the pain was white and immediate and irrelevant.

The horn sounded. 2-1 final.

Shane stood at center ice for a moment. The building was booing. Not the hate boo — the hockey boo, the we-wanted-to-win boo, the eighteen thousand people who had paid good money to watch their team and had watched the other team win instead. It was a familiar sound. Shane had earned it in every barn in the league.

The handshake line. Vaughn shook Shane's hand and held it an extra second. Didn't say anything. Cale Wagner nodded. Jalo shook Ilya's hand and said something — not Finnish. Russian. Ilya blinked.

"What did he say?" Shane asked, skating beside Ilya toward the tunnel.

"He said be safe."

Shane looked back at the building. The banners. The lights. The ice already being resurfaced for tomorrow, the Zamboni erasing the game the way Zambonis erased every game, making the ice new for the next one.

"It's not the same without Scott," Shane said.

Ilya looked at the Admirals' bench. Vaughn pulling off his gloves. The young guys filing off. The absence that was shaped like a six-two center with dark hair and a number that nobody else would wear.

"No," Ilya said. "Is not."

The locker room was not celebratory. It was relieved. A win on the road in a building that didn't want you to win, on a night when nobody's head was fully in the game, when the best thing you could say about the performance was that the result was right even if the process was wrong.

"That was not our best," Wiebe said. Matter-of-fact. Not angry. Wiebe didn't do angry after wins. He did honest. "We won because Wyatt stood on his head and Luca made a play. Tomorrow we're better."

Shane showered. Dressed. Put the ring back on. Across the room, Ilya did the same — chain unclasped, ring removed, back on the hand. The ritual. The return.

Shane looked up at the stands from the tunnel. Section 108. Scott Hunter was there — taller than the people around him, the dark hair, the frame of a man who had played center for fifteen years and still carried himself like he might need to take a faceoff at any moment. Kip was beside him. Smaller. Glasses. The scarf.

Scott caught Shane's eye. Raised one hand. Not a wave — an acknowledgment. *I'm here. I saw.*

Dinner was in the West Village. A restaurant Scott had chosen — small, candlelit, the kind of place where the host met you at the door and knew which table was yours and didn't tell anyone you were there. The front window was fogged from the kitchen heat. Shane could smell garlic and bread and something roasting, and the smell was so normal, so ordinary, that it almost undid him. The world was

made of airports and court orders and Russian consular officers, and also it was made of restaurants where bread was baking and candles were lit and four men could sit at a table and eat.

Scott and Kip were at a back table. Two glasses of water, a bread basket, the ease of two people who had arrived early and been comfortable in each other's silence while they waited.

Scott stood. Six-two, broad, the body of a recently retired athlete who still moved like he might need to drop gloves. He shook Shane's hand — the hockey handshake, firm, the grip of fifteen years of postgame lines. Then he pulled Ilya into a hug. Brief. Tight. The kind of hug that a man gives when he knows exactly what you're going through because he lived his own version of it.

"Good game," Scott said. "Ugly as hell, but good."

"Was not pretty," Ilya agreed.

"The pretty ones are overrated."

They sat. Kip across from Shane. He was smaller in person — or not smaller, but quieter in his body, the economy of someone who had spent years making himself invisible and kept the habit even after the reason for it was gone. He wore a navy sweater and his glasses and the green scarf from the stands, unwound now, draped over the back of his chair. His handshake was firm. His eyes were steady. And when the waiter came, Kip ordered for himself and Scott without checking, the muscle memory of a couple who had been choosing food together for long enough that the choosing had merged.

They talked about hockey first. The Admirals' retool. Vaughn's leadership. The new kids in New York's system. Then about Ottawa — the season, Luca's growth, Wyatt's Winter Soldier obsession, which Scott found hilarious because Eric Bennett had told him about Wyatt years ago and the description had only gotten more accurate.

The food came. Pasta. Wine for Scott and Kip, ginger ale for Shane and Coke for Ilya. Bread that was warm and dense and tasted like the city.

"The building felt strange without you," Shane said to Scott.

"Strange watching from up there," Scott said. He was twirling pasta on his fork, not looking at the food, looking at Shane. "Fourteen years on that ice. Carter's doing good, though."

"He played a captain's game."

"He's been a captain his whole career. He just didn't have the letter." Scott set his fork down. "The letter's not the thing. You know that."

Shane knew that.

Then Kip said, "How are you?"

Not to Shane. To Ilya.

The table went quiet. The restaurant around them — the murmur, the clinking, the bread-and-garlic warmth — kept going, but the table was its own room now, its own space. Kip's question had landed there, in the center, and the four of them were around it.

Ilya set his fork down.

"Am okay," he said. "Am not great. Am okay."

Kip nodded. "That's about right for where you are."

"You were okay too?" Ilya said.

"No. I was a mess." Kip said it simply. No performance. No self-deprecation. The plainness of a man who had been through something and come out the other side and could describe the something without flinching. "But I had Scott, and Scott had his

team, and the team had each other. The mess didn't kill us. We just had to survive it long enough for it to become something else."

"What did it become?"

Kip looked at Scott. The look between them was brief and full and private. It lasted maybe two seconds. In those two seconds, Shane saw the whole history — the hiding, the condo, the years of silence, the kiss on the ice, the exposure, the marriage. Two seconds. A whole life.

"It became a book," Kip said. "Among other things."

Shane reached into his jacket. He'd brought it — Kip's book. He set it on the table between the bread basket and the wine.

"Thank you for this," Shane said. "For sending it last night. Ilya found it this morning."

Kip's hand went to the cover. Touched it. The same gesture Ilya had made that morning — the flat of the hand, the contact, the confirmation.

"I wrote most of it in the condo," Kip said. "The years when nobody knew. Scott would leave for a road trip and I'd sit there in that apartment with the city outside the window and write. Not for anyone. Not for a publisher. Just to have proof that it was real. That what Scott and I had was real and not something I'd made up to survive the hiding."

He looked at Ilya.

"The hardest part isn't the people who hate you. The hardest part is the feeling that you imagined yourself. That the life you're building isn't solid. That you'll wake up and it'll be gone because it was never really there. The book was my way of making it solid. Writing it down made it true."

Ilya was quiet for a long time. The restaurant around them doing its restaurant things. Shane's hand was under the table, on Ilya's thigh. Not for anyone else. For them.

"I am reading it on the plane tomorrow," Ilya said.

"Good." Kip's mouth moved — the beginning of a smile. "The chapter about the first time Scott came out to a teammate is the one that'll get you. It got me and I wrote it."

Scott groaned. "Do we have to talk about the crying?"

"There was significant crying," Kip told Shane and Ilya. "Historic levels."

"It was allergies."

"In January."

"New York has winter allergies."

"Scott cried for forty-five minutes and then ate an entire pizza and then cried again," Kip said. "I have it on good authority because I was the one holding the pizza box."

Shane looked at Scott Hunter — six-two, the first openly gay captain in NHL history, the man who had kissed his husband on the ice in front of twenty thousand people — and saw the blush. The actual blush, rising from his neck to his ears, the flush of a man who could face down an entire league but could not survive his husband telling a story about pizza and tears.

"It was a really good pizza," Scott said.

Ilya laughed. The real one. The sound that came from the place Shane couldn't summon on purpose but could only create the conditions for. The laugh that had been missing since the charter yesterday, since the text, since the terminal. Shane hadn't heard it

since the BLADE: TACTICAL GRILL MASTER meme, and before that he couldn't remember.

Under the table, Shane's hand tightened on Ilya's thigh. Ilya's hand came down and covered it. The ring against Shane's knuckles. The warmth of his palm.

They talked for two more hours. About the cottage and the Kingfisher pub and Kip's juice bar days. About Anya eating seven pelmeni and the veterinary aftermath. About whether Scott would do television commentary, which Scott said he'd consider if they let him talk about hockey instead of narratives and if Kip agreed to read every script before air, which Kip said he would only do if Scott stopped leaving his equipment bag in the front hallway of their apartment, which had apparently been a six-year negotiation that showed no signs of resolution.

"It smells," Kip said.

"It's retired," Scott said. "It's nostalgic."

"It smells like a crime scene."

"It won a Cup."

"Scott. The bag did not win a Cup."

"The bag was there. The bag contributed."

Shane watched them. The banter that wasn't performance — it was the texture of a relationship, the accumulated friction and tenderness of two people who had chosen each other every day for years and would choose each other tomorrow and the day after that. He recognized it because he lived inside it. The same rhythm. The same language. The dialect that only two people spoke.

Ilya was watching them too. His face had changed over the course of the dinner — the jaw looser, the eyes warmer, the set of his

shoulders dropping by degrees as the evening went on. The man who had been holding everything above his head had, for two hours in a restaurant in the West Village, put some of it down.

They said goodbye on the sidewalk. Scott hugged Ilya again — longer this time, the hug of a man who had something to say and was saying it with his arms instead of his mouth. Kip shook Shane's hand and then, unexpectedly, pulled him into a hug too. Kip was shorter than Shane. His arms went around Shane's shoulders and he held on for a moment and then let go and stepped back and adjusted his glasses.

"Take care of him," Kip said. Quietly. For Shane.

"I will."

"I know you will. I'm saying it anyway."

Scott and Kip walked away down the sidewalk. Scott's arm went around Kip's shoulders. Kip leaned into him. They turned the corner and were gone.

Jensen drove them back to the hotel. The city through the windows. October. The lights and the traffic and the cold air coming through the crack in the window that Jensen kept open because Jensen kept a window open in every vehicle, which Shane had never asked about and which he assumed was a JTF2 thing.

Ilya was quiet in the car. His hand on Shane's knee, the thumb moving in slow circles. Not the bad quiet. The thinking quiet. The quiet of a man who had taken something in and was letting it settle.

"I like them," Ilya said.

"Yeah."

"Kip is not what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

Ilya was quiet for a moment. "The juice bar guy. Quiet. Small. Someone Scott protects."

"And?"

"He is the reason Scott Hunter came out. He is not small. He is the whole thing."

The hotel. The side entrance. Jensen checking the hall before they went to their floor. Marie's light was on under her door. Jensen went to his room. The lock clicked.

Shane opened the suite. The room was dark. The midtown light through the window — orange and blue and the ambient glow of a city that never went fully dark. He didn't turn on the overhead. Ilya didn't ask him to.

They stood in the room. The door closed behind them. The click of the lock. The sound of the building settling around them — the ventilation, the elevator somewhere, the city outside being the city.

Ilya put his hands on Shane's face. Both hands. The big hands, the callused palms, the fingers that curled around Shane's jaw and held him. Ilya's thumbs on Shane's cheekbones. The rings — both of them — against Shane's skin.

"Thank you," Ilya said.

"For what?"

"For this. Tonight. For bringing me to dinner. For putting the book where I would find it. For standing in front of me at the airport. For the pill last night. For holding my hand. For telling me Shane and hockey. For not sleeping so I could sleep." His thumbs moved on Shane's cheekbones. "For all of it, Shane. For all of it."

Shane's hands found Ilya's waist. Under the shirt. The warm skin. The muscle underneath, the architecture of a body that had been playing professional hockey for fourteen years and that Shane knew better than he knew his own — every scar, every knot, every place that ached and every place that didn't and the difference between the two.

"You don't have to thank me," Shane said.

"Am thanking you anyway."

They kissed. In the dark hotel room with the city light coming through the window and Ilya's hands on his face and Shane's hands on his skin. The kiss was slow. Not urgent — deliberate. Ilya's mouth tasting like the wine he hadn't drunk and the bread he had and something underneath that was just Ilya, the taste that Shane associated with home and safety and the madness of loving someone so much that the love itself became a thing you organized your life around.

They undressed each other. Slowly. Shane's jacket. Ilya's shirt — the dress shirt, unbuttoned, Shane's fingers working the buttons while Ilya stood still and let him. Ilya's chest. The cross on the chain. Shane put his mouth there — on the cross, on the skin around it, the hollow of Ilya's throat where his pulse lived.

Ilya's hands in Shane's hair. The fingers moving. Gentle.

They got into bed. The city light through the window. Orange and blue. The shadows of midtown on the ceiling, moving when the traffic moved, still when it stilled.

Ilya was on his back. Shane against his side, his head on Ilya's chest, his ear over Ilya's heart. The beat of it. Steady. The rhythm Shane had been falling asleep to for six years.

Ilya's hand was on Shane's back. The fingers tracing slow lines between his shoulder blades. The ring warm against Shane's spine.

Not going anywhere. Not trying to. Just existing.

"Shane," Ilya said.

"Yeah."

"I reached up my hand."

Shane pressed his face into Ilya's chest. The cross against his cheek.

"I know," Shane said. "I've got it."

They were quiet. Ilya's hand kept moving — the slow lines, the tracing, the fingertips drawing shapes Shane couldn't see. Down his spine. Across the small of his back. Up again. The touch was unhurried, exploratory, as though Ilya were learning Shane's body for the first time instead of the thousandth. As though the act of reaching up the hand had opened something in Ilya's fingers, too — a willingness to be slow, to be present, to not rush past the tender thing toward the safe thing.

Shane turned his head. Kissed Ilya's chest. Just there — the skin above the cross, the place that smelled like Ilya and hotel soap and the faint trace of sweat from the game that the shower hadn't fully erased. Ilya's heartbeat under his mouth.

Ilya's hand stopped moving.

Shane kissed him again. Lower. The sternum. The cross — his lips against the gold, the warmth of it, the metal that had been against Ilya's skin since his mother gave it to him and that Shane kissed not because it was holy but because it was Ilya's. The hollow between his ribs. The soft skin below, where the muscle started, the terrain of Ilya's body that Shane had mapped so thoroughly he could navigate it in the dark, and the dark was where they were.

Ilya's breathing changed. Not faster — deeper. The expansion of his rib cage under Shane's mouth, the lungs filling, the body making room.

"Shane," Ilya said. Different now. The voice lower. The accent thicker, the English thinning at the edges the way it did when Ilya's brain started letting go of the language of control and slipping into the language of want.

Shane moved up. Found Ilya's mouth. The kiss was not what he expected — not the slow kiss from this morning, not the comfort kiss from the hotel bed. Ilya kissed him like a man who had been holding something for a very long time and had just been told he didn't have to hold it anymore and the release was in his mouth, in his tongue, in the way his hand came up to the back of Shane's neck and pulled him in and held him there.

Shane made a sound against Ilya's lips. Small. Involuntary. The sound his body made when Ilya crossed the line from gentle to serious, the shift in pressure that said *this is not going to stop and I don't want it to stop.*

Ilya rolled them. Shane was on his back. Ilya above him — the weight of him, the size, the six-three and two-twenty of a professional athlete held above Shane on forearms that were shaking, not from effort but from something else. The hazel eyes in the city light. Looking down at Shane. Looking at him like he was the only thing in the room, which he was — Shane and hockey, and hockey was over, and what was left was Shane.

"I want—" Ilya said, and stopped. The jaw working. The accent. He switched to Russian and then back, the way he did when the English couldn't hold what he was feeling and the Russian was too private and he ended up somewhere between the two languages, speaking neither and both.

"I want to feel you," Ilya said. "I want to feel something that is not today. Not the airport. Not the passport. Not any of it. I want to feel

you."

Shane put his hand on Ilya's face. The stubble — two days, rough under Shane's palm. The cheekbone. The jaw. The face he'd spent fourteen years looking at across ice and across beds and across kitchen tables and that he would spend the rest of his life looking at if the law held and the court order held and the world gave them what the world owed them.

"I'm here," Shane said.

Ilya kissed him again. Harder. Shane's hands went to Ilya's back — the bare skin, the muscles moving under his palms, the knots at the shoulders that had been there for weeks. He dug his fingers in. Ilya made a sound into Shane's mouth — low, deep, the sound of pressure and release, the knot giving under Shane's thumb while Ilya's tongue was in his mouth.

They moved slowly. Not because slow was the plan — because slow was what this needed. Ilya's mouth on Shane's neck. Shane's hands on Ilya's back. The unhurried negotiation of two bodies that knew each other so well the knowing itself was a kind of foreplay — Shane turning his head to give Ilya the angle, Ilya finding the spot below Shane's ear that made Shane's hips move without permission, the choreography of six years rehearsed and unrehearsed at the same time.

Shane pulled Ilya's boxers down. Ilya kicked them off. Then Ilya's hands — the big hands, the careful hands — on Shane's waistband, the slow pull, Shane lifting his hips. The last barrier gone. Skin against skin. The full length of Ilya's body against his, the weight pressing Shane into the mattress, and Shane didn't feel crushed. He felt held. Pinned to the earth by the person who kept him on it.

Ilya's hips moved. Slow. The friction of them together — both hard, both wanting, the contact building heat between their bodies. Shane wrapped his leg around Ilya's hip. Pulled him closer. There was no closer. He pulled anyway.

"Look at me," Shane said.

Ilya looked. The hazel eyes. Wrecked. Open in a way Shane rarely saw — the walls down, the performance off, the armor stripped away by a day that had started with a book on a nightstand and a phone call to a therapist and the words *reach up your hand*. Ilya was looking at Shane the way he looked at him in their bed at home, in the dark, when nobody was watching and nobody would ever know — the look that was just for Shane and that Shane guarded like a man guarding a fire in a storm.

Shane reached between them. Took them both in his hand. Ilya's breath caught — a sound, not a word, his forehead dropping to Shane's, his eyes closing.

"No," Shane said. "Look at me."

Ilya opened his eyes.

Shane moved his hand. Slow. Both of them together in his grip, the heat of it, Ilya hard and thick against him, Shane's fingers not quite making it all the way around because the two of them together were more than one hand could hold. He adjusted. Tightened. Found the rhythm.

Ilya's arms were trembling. The forearms on either side of Shane's head, the muscles taut, the veins standing out. His mouth was open. His breathing was ragged. And his eyes were on Shane's — locked, held, the connection that was more intimate than the hand between their bodies because the hand was physical and the eyes were everything else.

"Shane," Ilya said. His voice was destroyed. "Shane, I—"

"I know."

"I cannot—"

"I know. Let go."

"I can't—"

"You can. I've got you. Let go."

Ilya's hips moved faster. Shane matched him. The rhythm building, the heat building, the pressure in Shane's stomach and thighs and the base of his spine where the tension coiled and coiled. Ilya's hand came down — covered Shane's hand, both of them holding both of them now, the fingers intertwined, the rings clicking together, the metal sound small and bright in the dark room.

Shane felt it when Ilya crossed over. The change in his breathing — the hitch, the pause, the body going taut like a wire pulled to breaking. Ilya's mouth opened. No sound. The silent thing, the one that was bigger than sound, the one that lived at the bottom of Ilya's chest and only came out when the walls were completely down.

Ilya came. The pulse of it against Shane's stomach, the shudder that went through Ilya's whole body — shoulders, arms, hips, the wave rolling through him, and Shane felt it everywhere they touched, which was everywhere, and the feeling of Ilya letting go — the actual letting go, the weight of the world leaving his body through the only exit it had — sent Shane after him.

Shane came with his face pressed into Ilya's neck and his hand still wrapped around both of them and Ilya's name in his throat, not spoken, just there, the shape of it held between his tongue and his teeth while his body emptied itself against Ilya's body and the room went white and then dark and then warm.

They lay in the mess of it. Breathing. Ilya collapsed on top of him — the full weight, the two-twenty that Shane took and wanted, the heaviness that was not heaviness but proof, the physical evidence that Ilya Rozanov was here and alive and in this bed and not in a detention facility and not on a plane to Moscow and not anywhere

else but here, on Shane, in Shane's arms, breathing against Shane's neck.

Shane's hand was in Ilya's hair. The other hand on his back. The skin damp. The room smelling like them — the specific smell, the one that belonged to no one else, the scent of two people who had just given each other the only thing they had left to give.

Ilya turned his head. His lips against Shane's ear.

"Shane and hockey," he said. The voice wrecked. Quiet.

Shane started to laugh. The sound came out as something else — a huff, a release, the exhale of a man who had been clenched for three days and had just, in the last two minutes, unclenched.

"Shane and hockey," Shane said.

Ilya lifted himself up. Looked down at Shane. The hazel eyes, soft now, the post-sex softness that was Shane's favorite version of Ilya — unguarded, flushed, the lopsided mouth relaxed into the lazy grin that was Shane's and Shane's alone.

"I am going to clean up," Ilya said. "And then I am going to come back to this bed. And then you are going to hold me while I sleep. And then tomorrow we fly to Pittsburgh and I finish Kip's book and we play hockey and then we go home."

"Okay."

"Okay."

Ilya got up. Went to the bathroom. Shane heard the water running. He lay on the bed and looked at the ceiling and felt his own heartbeat slow from the gallop to the walk and thought about nothing. For the first time in three days, he thought about nothing at all.

Ilya came back. Warm washcloth. He cleaned Shane up with the tenderness of a man whose hands were rough and who had learned to make them gentle — one of the first things Shane had taught him, years ago, in a hotel room in a different city, when they were still pretending they didn't want to stay.

He threw the washcloth toward the bathroom. It landed on the floor. Shane would have gotten up and hung it on the rack. He didn't get up. He didn't care where the washcloth was. This was growth.

Ilya got into bed. Shane turned into him. Head on Ilya's chest. Ear over his heart. The beat of it — slower now, the rhythm of a man coming down, settling, the body doing the thing the body did after sex, which was remember that it was safe.

Ilya's arm around him. The hand on Shane's back. The fingers tracing the slow lines again — the shapes, the patterns, the language of touch that Ilya spoke when the English and the Russian had both run out.

"Pittsburgh tomorrow," Shane said.

"Yes."

"Then home."

"Yes."

"Two more days."

Ilya pressed his mouth to the top of Shane's head. Held it there.

"Shane," he said against Shane's hair.

"Yeah."

"I reached up my hand."

"I know. I've got it."

"Don't let go."

"I won't."

They lay in the dark. New York outside. The court order ticking. Pittsburgh tomorrow. Home the day after. The book on the nightstand. The rings on their hands. The cross between them.

Shane closed his eyes. Listened to Ilya's heart. Fell asleep counting the beats.

Ilya

Chapter 17: Ilya

The morning after. A book finished on a plane. A friend who brings cold arepas from Colombia and asks nothing in return except that you eat them. A game that slips away in the final minutes. And somewhere over the border, the landing gear drops, and the word for what's below is the only word that matters.

He woke up with Shane's hair in his mouth.

This was not unusual. Shane slept like a man falling — started on his side, migrated inward over the course of the night, ended up pressed against Ilya's chest with his head tucked under Ilya's chin and his hair fanning across Ilya's face in a way that was uncomfortable and that Ilya would not have traded for any comfort in the world. Shane's hair smelled like hotel shampoo and, underneath that, like Shane — the scent that Ilya had first encountered in a hotel room in Toronto fourteen years ago and had spent the years since trying to find in every room Shane wasn't in.

Ilya lay still. The morning light in the room was pale. New York light — filtered through buildings, diluted, arriving at the window already secondhand. Shane was breathing against his neck. The small breaths. The warm ones. The rhythm that meant Shane was asleep and not pretending to be asleep, which were different rhythms and which Ilya had learned to distinguish during the years when Shane pretending to be asleep meant Shane was lying awake calculating the risk of being in the same bed as a Russian hockey player who was supposed to be his enemy.

Those years were over. They had been over for a long time. But Ilya still listened for the difference.

He moved his hand — slowly, carefully, the movement of a man trying not to wake the person on top of him — and found Shane's back. The skin warm under his palm. The ridge of Shane's spine. The small muscles along it, tight even in sleep, because Shane carried tension the way other people carried wallets — always, everywhere, a thing so constant it had become invisible to the person carrying it.

Ilya pressed his thumb into the knot between Shane's shoulder blades. Shane made a sound. Not awake. The sound his body made when pressure hit something that needed pressure, the involuntary release. Ilya pressed again. The knot moved under his thumb. Shane's breathing changed — deeper, slower, the body letting go of something it had been holding.

Last night.

Ilya lay in the hotel bed and let last night exist in his body. The sex — not the mechanics of it, not the physical sequence, but the thing underneath, the thing the sex had been about. Shane's hand around both of them. Shane's eyes. *Look at me.* The command that wasn't a command but a request, the asking underneath the telling, Shane needing to see Ilya's face while Ilya came apart because Shane needed proof that the coming apart was real and not performed.

It had been real.

Ilya had reached up his hand and Shane had taken it and the taking had been the whole thing — not the sex, not the orgasm, but the moment when Ilya had stopped pretending he could carry the weight alone and had let someone else put their hands on it.

Galina had told him to do this. Galina had been telling him to do this for two years. And Ilya had done it in a hotel room in midtown Manhattan with a court order ticking and a hockey game behind him and another one ahead, because apparently the only way Ilya Rozanov learned anything was by being pushed to the edge of the

cliff and discovering, at the last second, that the person standing next to him had a rope.

Shane was the rope. Shane was always the rope.

Ilya kissed the top of Shane's head. The dark hair. The smell. Shane stirred but didn't wake.

He thought about dinner. Scott and Kip at the restaurant in the West Village, the candles, the bread, the four of them at a table. He thought about the way Scott's hand had rested on Kip's shoulder when they were talking — casual, unthinking, the hand going there because the hand always went there, the way you put your keys in the same pocket every time. No calculation. No checking the room first. No micro-adjustment for who might be watching.

And Kip leaning into it. Not performing the lean. Just leaning, the body going toward the person it wanted to be near, the gravitational pull of a man who had spent years hiding and had decided, at some point, to stop.

Ilya envied that. He envied the ease of it — the public tenderness, the unselfconscious touching. He and Shane were better than they'd been. They held hands now. They kissed in the tunnel after games, in front of the team, in front of cameras. They'd come out. They'd married. They wore rings. But there was still something — a hesitation, a half-second delay between the impulse to touch and the touch itself, the ghost of a decade spent training himself not to reach for the person next to him.

That was his fault. Not Shane's. Shane had his own walls, his own rigidities, the autistic precision that made him need control over when and how and where. But Ilya's walls were older and built of different material. Shane's walls were about order. Ilya's were about survival.

He had learned, as a boy in Moscow, that the things you loved were the things that could be taken from you, and that the way to protect

them was to never let anyone see how much they mattered. His mother's cross, tucked inside his shirt. His feelings for Shane, tucked inside his body. The love that he'd carried for a decade like contraband, smuggled across borders, hidden in rooms, never declared.

He'd declared it now. He'd declared it publicly, legally, with rings and vows and an Instagram post written by Farrah Jalali. But the muscle memory of hiding was still in his hands. The half-second delay. The checking of the room. The old habit that said *someone is watching and the watching is dangerous.*

Scott and Kip didn't have that habit anymore. Or maybe they did, and they'd just gotten better at overriding it.

Ilya wanted to override it. He wanted to put his hand on Shane's shoulder in a restaurant without the half-second. He wanted the ease. He wanted the gravity.

He pressed his face into Shane's hair and breathed and thought: I *will get better at this. I will learn to reach without checking first. I will learn to be what Kip is for Scott — the person who leans in without thinking, who touches without calculating, who makes the love visible because the love deserves to be visible.*

Shane's alarm went off at seven. The phone on the nightstand, the soft chime, the sound that meant the day was starting whether or not the day had been invited.

Shane moved. The slow waking — the blink, the stretch, the brief confusion of a man remembering where he was. Hotel. New York. The game yesterday. The dinner. The everything.

His eyes found Ilya.

"Hi," Shane said.

"Hi."

"What time is it?"

"Seven."

"How long have you been awake?"

"A while."

Shane studied him. The dark eyes — alert now, the sleep gone, the mind already spinning up behind the gaze. Shane waking up was like watching a computer boot. You could see the processes starting, the systems loading, the man coming online.

"You okay?" Shane said.

Ilya didn't say *am fine*. He didn't translate. He said: "I am good, Shane. I am actually good."

Shane's mouth moved. The small one. Not the public smile — the private shift, the softening that Shane allowed himself in bed, in the morning, in the space between the alarm and the start of the day.

"Yeah?"

"Yes. Because of last night. Because of Galina. Because of you."

Shane put his hand on Ilya's chest. Over the cross. The morning version of last night's gesture — lighter, domestic, the touch that said *I'm here* in the daylight, when the daylight made everything less dramatic and more real.

"We fly to Pittsburgh at noon," Shane said.

"I know."

"Emil's flying separately. First class. Martin arranged it — he wants Emil in Pittsburgh in case anything happens at the arena or the hotel. We're covering his flight and hotel and hourly. He's our attorney on the US side."

"How much is his hourly?"

"You don't want to know."

"I want to know."

"Twelve hundred."

"Dollars?"

"Dollars."

Ilya was quiet for a moment. "He is worth it."

"He's worth it. He had a court order and two federal marshals standing in LaGuardia before we landed. That's worth twelve hundred an hour."

"Is worth fifteen hundred."

"Don't tell him that."

Ilya laughed. Small. The morning laugh, rusty, the first use of the mechanism. Shane's hand was still on his chest. The ring against Ilya's skin.

"Shane."

"Yeah."

"Last night. At dinner. Scott and Kip."

"Yeah."

"The way they touch each other. In public. Without thinking about it. Scott's hand on Kip's shoulder. Kip leaning into him."

Shane waited. Listening. The dark eyes steady.

"I want to be like that," Ilya said. "I want to touch you without the — without the checking. The looking around the room first. I still do that. You know I still do that."

"I know."

"Is my fault. Not yours. I trained myself for so long to not reach for you. In public. In front of people. Ten years, Shane. Ten years of teaching my hands to stay still. And now my hands are still sometimes when I want them to move and I hate it."

Shane shifted closer. His forehead against Ilya's. The position from last night — the intimate distance, the shared breath.

"We'll get there," Shane said.

"You are patient with me."

"I'm not patient. I'm stubborn."

"You are patient and stubborn. Is why I married you."

"You married me because I'm the only person who can keep up with you on the ice. And I'm very handsome."

"That too."

They lay there. Foreheads touching. The alarm had stopped. The room was quiet. New York outside, doing its morning thing — the traffic starting, the garbage trucks, the city waking up in layers.

"Pittsburgh," Shane said.

"Pittsburgh."

"Game tonight. Then home."

"Home," Ilya said. The word in English. But what he heard was *Canada*. The country that wanted him. The country that was letting

him stay.

The charter to Pittsburgh was an hour. Ilya sat in 4A. Shane in 4B. The book open in Ilya's lap — page two hundred and twelve, where he'd left off yesterday.

He read.

Kip wrote the way Kip talked — quiet, precise, without ornament. The sentences were short. The observations were sharp. He wrote about the condo in New York and the way the light came through the windows in the afternoon when Scott was at practice, and how the silence of the apartment was different from the silence of being alone, because in the apartment Kip was alone *with purpose* — he was waiting, he was keeping the space warm, he was existing in the place where Scott would return. The aloneness had a shape. It was shaped like Scott.

Ilya read that passage twice.

He knew that shape. He had lived inside it for ten years — the Shane-shaped absence that occupied every hotel room after Shane left, every arena where they played on opposite sides, every summer before the summers at the cottage when Ilya would go back to Moscow and carry the absence with him like luggage he couldn't check.

The book. The condo. The writing-it-down-to-make-it-real. Ilya understood that impulse even though he'd never acted on it. He hadn't written anything down. He'd carried it in his body instead — in the muscle memory, in the cross, in the hotel rooms he remembered in sequence like beads on a chain.

Toronto. Vancouver. Boston. Montreal. The Ritz in Montreal, room 1412, where Shane had kissed him for the first time without pretending there was a reason for it — no game to process, no rivalry to fuel, just Shane's mouth on his because Shane wanted it

there. Ilya had stood in that room after Shane left and put his hand on the pillow where Shane's head had been and held it there until the pillow went cold.

He turned the page.

Shane was beside him, laptop open, watching Pittsburgh film. Quiet. Working. Being Shane — the steady presence, the organized mind, the man who prepared for things so that the things could not surprise him. Ilya glanced at him. Shane's profile in the airplane light. The jaw. The freckles. The focus.

Ilya reached over and put his hand on Shane's thigh. Not for a reason. Not to get his attention. Just to touch him. Just to let the hand go where it wanted without checking the cabin first.

Shane didn't look up from the film. His hand came down and covered Ilya's. The rings together. The warmth.

Small. But real.

Pittsburgh in October was gray. The city sat at the confluence of three rivers and the rivers made the air heavy and damp and the sky looked like a ceiling. The bus from the airport crossed a bridge — one of Pittsburgh's impossible number of bridges, more bridges than any city needed — and the skyline appeared through the fog like something half-formed.

The hotel was downtown. Glass tower, marble lobby, the same architecture of transience that every road hotel shared. Jensen checked the perimeter. Marie swept the floor. Emil had texted from his flight — landed, checked in at the Fairmont, available by phone. The Fairmont. First class and the Fairmont. Ilya respected this. If you were going to hire a lawyer who charged twelve hundred an hour, you wanted the lawyer who flew first class and stayed at the Fairmont, because that lawyer had spent twelve years in the

Southern District and knew what he was worth and didn't apologize for it.

Shane handled the room assignments with Harris and Milt the intern. Shane was good with admin stuff. Ilya went upstairs. Dropped his bag. Looked out the window at the river — the Allegheny, gray-green, moving slowly, carrying whatever rivers carried in Pittsburgh. He thought about Ottawa and the Rideau Canal and the way the water looked in October when the leaves were turning, and he wanted to be there with a force that was physical, a pull in his chest, the homesickness of a man who had only recently acquired a home worth being sick for.

Two more days. The game tonight. The charter tomorrow. Then home.

His phone buzzed. Not Martin. Not Galina. Not Harris.

Svetlana.

Ilyusha. I just landed in Pittsburgh. Surprise. Don't be mad. I brought arepas from Bogotá. Meet me at the arena? — S

Ilya stared at the phone.

He hadn't heard from her since May. She'd texted a few times from South America — brief, warm, photos of mountains and markets and a llama she'd named after him. She'd spent the summer hiking Peru, Bolivia, Colombia. Something about altitude and silence and needing to be somewhere that wasn't Boston and wasn't Moscow and wasn't anywhere her phone worked reliably.

Svetlana Vetrova, American citizen, marketing coordinator for the Boston Bears, who organized sponsored content and social media campaigns for a professional hockey team nine months of the year and spent the other three climbing things.

She'd been at the wedding. She'd been at the stag party two years ago — the one at the house with the pool, where she'd taught Luca to salsa dance and had beaten Zane at beer pong while drinking everyone else under the table.

She was always there for the big moments. She just also went away between them, and the going away was how she stayed sane, and Ilya understood it because Ilya had his own version of disappearing, which was hockey, which was the ice, which was the place he went when everything else became too much.

But this summer had been the wrong summer to be gone.

He texted back: *Am not mad. Am confused. How did you know I was in Pittsburgh?*

Sveta: *Ilyusha. Schedules are public. I work in hockey marketing. This is literally my job.*

Then: *I have arepas. They are getting cold. This is your fault for asking obvious questions.*

Ilya put his phone down. Picked it up. Put it down again.

"Shane," he said.

Shane came out of the bathroom. Toothbrush. The morning ritual continuing into a new city. "Yeah."

"Svetlana is in Pittsburgh."

Shane's eyebrows went up. This was significant — Shane's eyebrows did not go up for most things. Shane's eyebrows were among the most controlled eyebrows in professional hockey. They moved when Shane permitted them to move.

"She just texted me. She is at the arena. She has arepas."

"She has arepas?"

"From Bogotá. She was hiking in South America. All summer."

"I know. She missed everything."

"Not on purpose. She was — she needed the distance. You know how Sveta is."

"Yes, I know how she is. She leaves and comes back and brings food from wherever she's been and expects you to act like she was only gone for an afternoon."

"Yes."

"And you love her for it."

"I love her for it and I am also—"

"Annoyed."

"Not annoyed. She was gone, Shane. All summer. The shooting. The asylum filing. The passport. She was on a mountain in Bolivia while I was — while all of this was happening."

Shane put the toothbrush down. Came into the room. Sat beside Ilya.

"She's here now," Shane said.

"She is here now. With arepas."

"So go see her. Harris will get her a seat."

Ilya saw her during warmups.

Section 204. She was alone — no entourage, no companion, just Svetlana in a seat by the glass with her legs crossed and her chin propped on her hand and the look on her face that she'd had since

she was fourteen, which was the look of a woman who found the entire world amusing and had decided to watch it like television.

She was wearing a Centaurs jersey. Number 81. His number. The jersey was too big for her — she was small, five-five, thin in the way of women who hiked at altitude for months at a time, and the jersey hung off her shoulders like a dress. Her dark hair was longer than the last time he'd seen her. Braided. The braid over one shoulder.

She caught his eye during warmups. Raised one hand. Not a wave — a salute. The gesture she'd been giving him since they were kids, the two-fingered tap to the temple, *I see you, I'm here, carry on.*

He saluted back. On the ice. In front of eighteen thousand people. Shane saw it. Didn't say anything.

The game was close and then it wasn't and then it was again and then it wasn't.

Pittsburgh came out with the energy of a team playing at home on a Friday night with a building full of people who had read the headlines and wanted to see the Russian with the revoked passport. The attention was different here than in New York — less sympathetic, more curious, the crowd unsure whether Ilya was a hero or a spectacle and content to watch and decide later.

The Panthers' forecheck was relentless. They played a heavy game — big bodies along the boards, contested zones, the neutral zone clogged with sticks and elbows. Ottawa couldn't get clean entries. The passes that had been a half-step off in New York were a full step off in Pittsburgh, the fatigue of a third game in four nights settling into the team's legs like sand.

Pittsburgh scored first. Ilya was on the ice. A turnover at the Ottawa blue line — Dykstra's pass to Chouinard intercepted, two-on-one the other way, and the puck was in the net before Wyatt had a chance to set. 1-0.

Ilya tied it four minutes later. A rush up the right side — speed, the long stride, the body remembering what the body was built for even when the mind was in three other places. He cut inside the defenseman, pulled the goalie left, and roofed it. Bar down. The sound of the crossbar ringing and then the net catching and then the building going quiet for one second before resuming its noise.

The second period was a disaster. Pittsburgh scored twice — once on the power play, a one-timer from the left circle that beat Wyatt clean, and once on a scramble in front of the net that involved four sticks and six bodies and ended with the puck trickling across the line in the most undignified way a goal could be scored. 3-1.

Wiebe called a timeout. Fred had the clipboard. The magnets. The arrows. But the arrows couldn't fix legs that were tired and brains that were scattered and a team that had been running on adrenaline and righteousness since LaGuardia and was now running out of both.

Luca scored at the end of the second. A backhand from in close — the move he'd been developing since camp, the patience to hold the puck an extra beat, to wait for the goalie to commit, to put it where the goalie wasn't. 3-2. The period ended with Ilya on the bench, breathing hard, watching the Zamboni.

Third period. Shane tied it. Power play — the half-wall, the bumper, the shot through traffic. Shane's release was the fastest in the league and had been the fastest in the league for a decade, and when the shot left his stick the building knew it and the goalie knew it and the puck was in the net before anyone's brain caught up to what their eyes had seen. 3-3.

The building was loud now. The Friday night crowd, the tied game, the drama of the visiting team and the Russian captain and the headlines that had turned a regular-season game into something people felt they were witnessing. Ilya could feel the crowd leaning in. Wanting the finish. Wanting the story.

Pittsburgh gave them the story. With two minutes left, a defensive zone turnover. Ilya's turnover — his stick, his mistake, the puck coming off his blade wrong because his hands were heavy and his brain was a half-second behind his body. The Pittsburgh winger picked it up, walked in alone, beat Wyatt five-hole.

4-3 Pittsburgh. Final.

The horn. The loss. The handshake line, the locker room, the silence of a team that had fought back from two down and had the game tied and had given it away in the last two minutes because their captain had turned the puck over with heavy hands.

Wiebe didn't say it was Ilya's fault. Nobody said it was Ilya's fault. Nobody needed to. Ilya sat in his stall and unlaced his skates and knew what he knew, which was that the puck had come off his stick wrong because his body was tired and his mind was carrying a country's worth of weight and the fatigue had found his hands at the worst possible moment.

Shane sat beside him. Didn't speak. Put his hand on the back of Ilya's neck — the same spot where Ilya's hand went on Shane — and squeezed. Once. Then he went to shower.

Svetlana was waiting in the family room.

She stood when she saw him. The jersey. The braid. The face — fine-boned, dark-eyed, the face of a woman who looked like her mother and moved like her father and had spent her adult life trying to figure out which of those inheritances to keep.

"Ilyusha," she said.

She hugged him. Not the careful hug of someone testing the temperature after months away. The full hug — arms around his neck, her face against his chest, the hug of a woman who had

known him since he was eight years old and did not believe in gradual re-entry.

"You are thinner," she said into his chest.

"You are thinner."

"I hiked the Inca Trail. You have an excuse?"

"Passport revoked. Country trying to kidnap me. Lawyers."

She pulled back. Looked up at him. The dark eyes — serious now, the amusement gone. "I know. I saw the news. In Bogotá. On a television in a hostel. I was eating ceviche and your face was on CNN and I almost choked."

"You choked on ceviche because of me?"

"Nearly choked. The ceviche was also very spicy."

She held his face in her hands. Small hands. Strong — the grip of a woman who had been climbing mountains for three months. Her thumbs on his cheeks. Looking at him the way she'd looked at him when they were teenagers in Moscow and the world was already hard but hadn't yet become impossible.

"I am sorry I was not here," she said. "I should have come back when the news broke. I should have called more. I was in the mountains and the service was — but that is an excuse. I should have found a way."

"Sveta—"

"No. You needed people and I was on a mountain. This is — I do this. I go away. And I tell myself the going away is necessary but sometimes the going away is just going away."

"You always come back."

"I always come back. But the coming back should not require arepas as an apology."

Ilya took her hands off his face. Held them. "The arepas are a very good apology."

"They are cold now."

"Cold arepas are still arepas."

She smiled. The real one — not the performance smile she gave at Bears marketing events, not the polished one from her father's dinner parties. The one from when they were kids. The one that meant she was done apologizing and was ready to be Svetlana again.

"Also," she said, "I had a boyfriend. On the trip. Gunnar. From Iceland."

"Had?"

"Had. Past tense. We broke up after the holiday. He was very handsome. Very tall. Excellent at hiking. Terrible at understanding why I needed to watch hockey highlights on my phone during dinner."

"This was a problem?"

"He said, 'Why do you care about men hitting each other on ice?' Ilyusha. Men hitting each other on ice is my entire career. My entire childhood. My father was a goaltender. You are my best friend. I have spent my whole life in rinks. And this man — this very handsome Icelandic man — looked at me over pasta in Cusco and said he did not understand the appeal of hockey."

"So you ended it."

"It would not have worked. A man who does not understand hockey does not understand me."

"This is true."

"Also he did not like that I called my father every Sunday. He said it was 'dependent.' I said it was love. He said there was a difference. I said there was not."

Shane appeared. Showered, dressed, the bag over his shoulder. He looked at Svetlana. Svetlana looked at him.

"Shane Hollander," Svetlana said. "You look less thin than last time."

"That's because your boy here stress-cooks. I've eaten more pelmeni in the last four months than in the previous six years."

"Ilya stress-cooks now?"

"Ilya stress-cooks. He also stress-bakes. Last week he made blini at two in the morning because he couldn't sleep. I ate eleven of them."

"Eleven blini at two in the morning. This is love, Shane."

"This is heartburn. But yes."

They went to the hotel suite. Svetlana had the arepas — cold, as promised, but still dense and good, the cornmeal splitting when Ilya bit into one, the filling spilling onto his fingers. She'd also brought empanadas and a bag of coffee beans from a farm in Huila that she described in detail that neither Shane nor Ilya had requested but that both of them listened to because Svetlana talking about coffee was better than Svetlana not talking at all.

She told them about South America. The Inca Trail. The salt flats in Bolivia. The hostel in Bogotá where she'd met a woman from Finland who made jewelry from volcanic rock. She talked with her hands, the way she always had, the gestures filling the space around her with shapes and emphasis, and Ilya watched her and felt the months of absence shrinking — not gone, but smaller now, in the room with her.

She asked about the case. Ilya told her. Not all of it — not the legal architecture, not Martin's strategy — but the shape of it. The asylum application. The citizenship filing. The enemy-of-state designation. The airport.

Svetlana listened without interrupting. This was unusual. Svetlana interrupted everything — meetings, dinners, conversations, silences. But she sat on the hotel couch with her legs tucked under her and her hands around a glass of water and she listened, and when Ilya finished, she was quiet for a long time.

"My father could help," she said.

The room changed. Not the temperature — the atmosphere. Shane straightened by the window. His arms crossed. Listening.

"Sveta—"

"No, listen. You know how my father feels about you. He loves you. He has loved you since you were eight years old and you came to our house for dinner and ate four bowls of Mama's borscht and told her it was the best thing you had ever tasted. He still talks about that. 'The boy who ate four bowls and asked for more.'"

"I was hungry. I was always hungry."

"He loves you, Ilyusha. Like a son. He has always loved you like a son. And he is — he is connected. You know this. The people who are doing this to you, the people who revoked your passport and sent those men to the airport — my father knows those people. He sits in rooms with those people. He could make calls. He could get them to back off."

"No."

"Ilya—"

"No, Sveta. I am not getting your family involved in this. Your father is Minister of Interior. If he intervenes on my behalf — if anyone in Moscow even suspects that Sergei Vetrov is protecting the man they just declared an enemy of the state — the consequences are not for me. They are for him. For your mother. For you."

"I am an American citizen. I live in Boston. I work for the Bears."

"And your father lives in Moscow. Your mother lives in Moscow. Your brother lives in Moscow. Russia does not punish the person who acts. Russia punishes the people the person loves. You know this. I know this. My father taught me this when I was nine."

Svetlana's jaw tightened. She looked like her father when she did that — the same set of the mouth, the same stubbornness in the bone structure. Sergei Vetrov's daughter, who loved her father with the fierce devotion of a woman who had been treasured from birth.

Svetlana was a daddy's girl and had never pretended otherwise — she called him every Sunday, she kept his old goaltending photo in her apartment in Boston, she flew to Moscow for his birthday every year. She adored him. And the adoration made it hard for her to see the full scope of what her father operated within, because the machinery had never been pointed at her.

"He would want to help," she said. Quieter now.

"I know he would. Tell him I am grateful. Tell him I am okay. But do not let him make calls. Not for me. The risk is too high."

Svetlana was quiet. Her hands around the glass. The water untouched.

"Okay," she said. "Okay. I won't."

"Sveta."

"What."

Ilya leaned forward. His elbows on his knees. The cross at his sternum. "I need you to do something for me. Not your father. You."

"What."

"Alexei."

The name landed in the room. Ilya's brother. Estranged. Four months of silence. Were they alive? Were they in captivity somewhere?

"I need to know he is okay," Ilya said. "Him and his family. I cannot call him. I cannot text him. If I contact him, Russia uses it — proof that the enemy of the state is communicating with Russian nationals, leverage against Alexei, ammunition. Martin told me not to reach out. But I need to know."

"You want me to check on him."

"You grew up with us, Sveta. You know Alexei. You know his family. If you reach out to him, it is not strange — it is a childhood friend checking in. It is not the same as me calling him."."

"Ilya. If I contact Alexei and someone notices—"

"I know. I know the risk. I am asking you because I do not have anyone else to ask. I cannot ask Martin — Martin is my lawyer, everything he does is documented. I cannot ask Shane — Shane is my husband, they are already watching Shane. I need someone who has a reason to know Alexei that has nothing to do with me."

Svetlana looked at him for a long time. Then she nodded.

"I will find out," she said. "I will be careful. I will not be obvious."

"You are never obvious."

"I am sometimes very obvious. But not about this."

She reached across the couch and took his hand. Squeezed it. The grip strong, the fingers calloused from rope and rock.

"He is your brother, Ilyusha. Whatever is between you — whatever silence, whatever distance — he is your brother. I will make sure he is okay."

"Thank you, Sveta."

"Now eat the empanadas. They are also cold but I carried them from Colombia and I will be insulted if you do not eat them."

Ilya ate the empanadas. Shane ate two, which was Shane's version of indulgence — the diet loosened by four months of Ilya's stress-cooking, the rigid nutritional framework bending under the weight of pelmeni and blini and whatever else Ilya produced from their kitchen at unreasonable hours. Shane eating empanadas at ten-thirty at night in a hotel room in Pittsburgh. Growth.

The charter home was at seven the next morning. Svetlana had an early flight to Boston — back to the Bears, back to the marketing department, back to the life she'd built in a country that wasn't her father's. She hugged Ilya at the hotel entrance. Long. Then she hugged Shane, which surprised Shane, because Svetlana did not hug Shane often, and when she did, Shane stood very still and let it happen with the posture of a man being embraced by a small, affectionate hurricane.

"Take care of him," she told Shane.

"I will."

"And let him cook for you. He needs to cook. It is how he—" She made a gesture with her hands. The gesture that meant everything she couldn't say in English about what cooking was for Ilya — the love, the control, the act of making something warm for someone when the world was cold.

"I know," Shane said.

"Good. Eat the blini."

She left. The cab pulled away. The city was still dark.

On the charter, Ilya finished Kip's book.

The last chapter. Kip at the Cup finals. Scott on the ice. The kiss — the famous kiss, the one that changed everything, described from Kip's perspective, from the stands, watching the man he loved decide, in front of twenty thousand people, to stop hiding. Kip wrote about the moment before the kiss — the second when Scott looked up at the stands and found him and Kip saw the decision happening on Scott's face in real time. Not the kiss itself. The moment before it. The choosing.

Ilya closed the book. Held it in his lap. The weight of it. The pages.

Shane was beside him. Asleep. Or close to it — the head back, the eyes closed, the breathing not yet at the deep rhythm of real sleep.

"Shane," Ilya said.

"Mm."

"The book. The last chapter."

"Mm."

"It is about the choosing. Not the kiss. The moment before. When Scott decides."

Shane opened one eye. "You're going to make me cry on a charter flight."

"You don't cry."

"I might cry."

"You will not cry. You will organize your feelings into a spreadsheet and review them later."

"That's fair."

Ilya leaned his head against Shane's shoulder. The book in his lap. The team around them — Wyatt asleep, Troy with earbuds, Zane reading something on his phone, Luca sketching in the small notebook he carried, the pencil moving in quick, sure strokes.

Harris came down the aisle. Phone in hand. He leaned down to Shane's row.

"Podcasts," he said. "Top Shelf did a breakdown of the Pittsburgh game. Brewer's fully turned — called the passport revocation 'state-sponsored intimidation of a professional athlete' and said the league needs to take an official position."

"Fitz?" Shane said.

"Fitz is Fitz. Agreed but hedged. Said there are 'legitimate questions about precedent' but that Russia 'crossed a line.' Two Hockey Chicks did a legal analysis with a guest — immigration attorney from DC. Detailed. Accurate. Sammy called our legal team 'the best-prepared operation in professional sports.'"

"Hear Me Roar?"

"Rufus did a five-minute monologue about the team at the airport. It's going viral. Janeway cried. Roxy made fun of them."

"Real Hockey?"

Harris looked at his phone. "Still nothing. Four days of silence. Which is, in itself, a statement."

He moved on down the aisle. Shane looked at Ilya.

"They're turning," Shane said.

"Some of them."

"Enough of them."

Martin called as the charter crossed into Canadian airspace. Shane took it. Ilya listened — Shane's side, the short questions, the precise follow-ups, the legal pad on the tray table with the pen and the handwriting that nobody could read.

Shane hung up. Looked at Ilya.

"The citizenship interview is scheduled," Shane said. "Wednesday. IRCC office in Ottawa. Melinda will prep you Monday and Tuesday."

"What do they want to know?"

"Your story. Your timeline. Why you want to be Canadian. Why you left Russia. The asylum filing, the threats, the persecution. All of it. Melinda says it's standard for accelerated applications, but they'll be thorough because of the profile."

"I have to tell them about my father."

"You have to tell them what's relevant. Melinda will walk you through it."

"And my mother."

"Ilya. Melinda will prep you. You don't have to figure it out on the plane."

Ilya looked out the window. Below them, the border. The line on the map that meant nothing to the land and everything to the people on it. On one side, a country where three men in suits had tried to grab him at an airport. On the other side, a country that was offering him a seat at a table and asking him to explain why he wanted to sit there.

He knew why. He'd known since the first summer at the cottage, when Shane had driven him down the dirt road and shown him the

lake and the dock and the kayaks, and Ilya had stood on the pier and looked at the water and the trees and the silence and thought: *I could live here. I could live in this country, in this cold, near this person, and it would be enough. It would be more than enough. It would be the whole thing.*

He just had to say it out loud. To a person with a stamp.

The charter descended. Ottawa below — the river, the canal, the Parliament buildings catching the morning light, the city small and clean and precise, the city that had become his home because Shane was in it and Shane was his home and the city was just the thing that held the home inside it.

The landing gear dropped. Ilya felt the thud of it in his chest.

Canada.

Shane's hand found his. The rings. Both of them. The metal clicking as their fingers intertwined.

"Home," Shane said.

"Home," Ilya said.

The wheels touched the runway. The plane slowed. The team began to stir — bags, phones, the noise of men returning to the place they belonged.

Ilya held Shane's hand and didn't check the cabin first.

Shane

Chapter 18: Shane

His mom made pasta. His dad brought a newspaper and something he wasn't saying yet. A familiar office asks harder questions, three politicians send a letter, and a Thursday night game becomes something no one in the building will forget. In the locker room after, a name finally has a face. Shane's dad texts four words with no period.

His mom had made pasta.

Shane smelled it from the front door — garlic, butter, the particular density of a kitchen that had been cooking for an hour. Beside him, Ilya stopped. His bag still over his shoulder. His hand on the doorframe. The face doing the thing it did when Ilya encountered something he hadn't expected and needed a second to let it exist.

"Fettuccine," Ilya said.

"Smells like it."

Anya came first. The click of her nails on the hardwood, the scramble around the corner, the body that was fifteen pounds of terrier-shepherd and all of it aimed at Ilya's shins. She hit him at speed. Ilya dropped his bag, crouched, and caught her. She was shaking — the anxious tremor she did when they'd been gone too long, her whole body vibrating with the grievance of a dog who had been fed and walked and spoken to in Russian by his mother but who had not been held by the correct person for four days.

"Papa doma, sobachka!" Ilya told her. "We came home for you."

She licked his face. He let her.

Shane stepped around them. The hallway. The house. The smell of home underneath the smell of dinner — the laundry detergent his mom used, the faint trace of morning coffee, the wood polish on the banister that he polished four times a month. The house had been holding itself while they were gone, the way houses did, and now it was letting them back in.

His mom came out of the kitchen. Dish towel over her shoulder. Hair up. The look on her face that Shane had seen his whole life — the one that said *I have been managing everything in your absence and everything is fine and I will now stop managing and let you walk through the door before I start talking.* She gave him approximately four seconds.

"Flight was good?"

"Flight was fine."

"Pittsburgh?"

Shane blew a raspberry and stuck one thumb down.

"I know. I watched." She looked past Shane to Ilya, who was still on the floor with Anya. "Ilya. Dinner's almost ready. Fettuccine Alfredo with blackened chicken."

Ilya looked up. The dog in his arms. The expression on his face — gratitude, fatigue, the particular softness that Shane's mother could produce in Ilya with the announcement of a meal.

"Yuna," Ilya said. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me. Thank the chicken. It cooperated."

Shane's dad appeared from the study. Glasses on. The newspaper tucked under his arm — the actual newspaper, the physical object, because his dad had been reading the Ottawa Citizen in print since

before Shane was born and would continue to do so until they stopped printing it. He shook Shane's hand. Not a hug — his dad didn't hug at the door. He hugged at departures. Arrivals were handshakes. Shane had never asked about this and never would.

"Good trip?" his dad said.

"Complicated."

"I'd imagine."

His dad looked at Ilya. Something in his face shifted — not visibly, not to anyone who didn't know him, but Shane knew him, and the shift was there. A tightening around the eyes. The look his dad got when he was carrying something he'd decided not to put down yet.

"Ilya," his dad said. "Welcome home."

"David. Thank you."

They sat at the table. His mom had set it — the good plates, the cloth napkins, the effort that said *this is dinner, not just food*. Ilya's place had the fettuccine — the wide noodles, the cream sauce, the blackened chicken sliced over the top. Shane's place had spaghetti squash.

Shane looked at his plate. Looked at Ilya's plate. Looked at his mom.

"Spaghetti squash," he said.

"You've been eating pelmeni and borscht and blinis for four months."

"We were going through some stuff."

"I know what you were going through. I was here. I didn't say anything because it was summer and your husband was stress-cooking and I was not going to be the person who took that away from either of you." She set the salad bowl on the table. "It's October. You have a season. Ilya has a different metabolism than you do."

Ilya was studying his fettuccine with the focus of a man who had absolutely no intention of making eye contact.

"You just like him more than you like me," Shane said.

"I like both of you. I feed you differently. Eat."

Shane ate the spaghetti squash. His mom had roasted it with garlic and parmesan and the competence of a woman who could make even a corrective meal taste like she meant it.

Dinner was quiet. Not the bad quiet — the tired quiet, the sound of four people eating together who had spent four days carrying different versions of the same weight and were now, for an hour, putting it down. His mom talked about the foundation — a donor meeting, a new camp partnership in Winnipeg. His dad talked about the canal. Jensen had reported something about the perimeter — his dad said it casually, the way his dad said everything that was actually important, like he was mentioning the weather.

Ilya ate his fettuccine slowly. He complimented it three times, which was not unusual — Ilya complimented his mom's cooking the way other people complimented sunsets, with a frequency and sincerity that his mom pretended to find excessive and obviously loved.

Shane watched his dad. The newspaper was on the counter behind him. The glasses. The quiet. His dad had been quiet since they arrived — not absent, not cold, just operating at a lower frequency than usual, the volume turned down. Shane filed it and moved on. His dad had rhythms. Not everything was a signal.

The IRCC office on Laurier Avenue looked the same. Limestone, glass, the federal architecture that said *this building serves a purpose and the purpose is not beauty*. Shane had been here once — June, the first meeting, when the world was different and the word "asylum" was something that happened to other people.

Melinda was waiting in the lobby. Navy suit, her hair pulled back, the leather briefcase that she carried everywhere and that Shane suspected contained not just files but the emotional infrastructure of a woman who managed chaos for a living. She shook Shane's hand. Shook Ilya's. The handshake she gave Ilya was different — firmer, held a beat longer, the way Melinda touched Ilya when she was saying *I'm here* without words.

Martin was behind her. The glasses, the jaw, the posture of a man who had been ex-military for ten years but whose body hadn't received the memo. He nodded at Shane. Gave Ilya the brief, level look that Martin gave before anything difficult — the look that said *I know what's coming and we're ready for it.*

"Bruneau's upstairs," Melinda said. "Same office. He's been briefed on the file but he'll want to hear it from you."

"Both of us?" Shane said.

"Both of you. You're the spouse. You're the petitioner. You filed jointly. He needs your testimony on the relationship, the timeline, the cohabitation. And he needs Ilya's testimony on the persecution."

They went up. The elevator. The hallway with the fluorescent lights and the government carpet and the framed prints of Canadian landscapes that looked like they'd been chosen by a committee and approved by a different committee. Shane's hands were in his pockets. Ilya's thumb was on the cross.

The office was the same. Small. A desk, two chairs on one side, one on the other. A window that looked out on Laurier Avenue and the traffic and the October sky, which was gray in the way Ottawa's sky was gray in October — committed, thorough, gray all the way to the edges.

Terence Bruneau stood when they came in. The same — fifties, thinning gray hair combed back, reading glasses low on his nose. Four months hadn't changed him. The same office, the same file

open on the desk, the same pen. He shook their hands. His grip was firm and his eyes were kind and the kindness was not performance — it was the kindness of a man who had sat across from hundreds of people who needed something from his country and who took that sitting seriously.

"Mr. Hollander. Mr. Rozanov." He gestured to the chairs. "Please."

They sat. Melinda and Martin took chairs along the wall — present but not between. The table was between Bruneau and Shane and Ilya, and on the table was a file. The file was thick. Shane could see tabs. Color-coded.

"I'll be honest with you," Bruneau said. "When we met in June, I told you we were looking at eighteen months. Standard processing. The file was solid, the documentation was thorough, and I expected this to move through channels the way these things move through channels — slowly, but forward."

He opened the file. Looked at it. Closed it again.

"That was before the shooting. Before the enemy-of-state designation. Before the extradition request, the passport revocation, and the Russian Federation sending consular officers to your home." He looked at Ilya. "The circumstances have changed, Mr. Rozanov. Significantly."

"Yes," Ilya said.

"The Minister's office is aware of your case. The expedited track is approved. What we're doing today is the formal interview — your testimony, both of you, on the record. This is the last step before the file goes to the decision-maker."

Shane felt something loosen in his chest. Not relief — not yet. The loosening that came before relief, the body preparing for the possibility that something might go right.

"I need to ask you questions," Bruneau said. "Some of them you've answered before. Some of them will be new. I need your answers to be complete and honest, even when they're difficult. Especially when they're difficult."

"We understand," Shane said.

Bruneau started with Shane. The relationship timeline — when they met (December 2008, World Juniors, Regina), when the relationship became physical (July 2010, Toronto, the CCM shoot), the years of secrecy, the move to Ottawa, the marriage. Shane answered the way he answered everything — precisely, in order, with dates and facts and the kind of structural clarity that Bruneau's file needed.

Then Bruneau asked: "Why did you hide it?"

Shane was quiet. The question was simple. The answer was not.

"Because it was hockey," Shane said. "Because the league, the culture, the world we were in — there was no space for it. There was no model for it. Scott Hunter hadn't happened yet. There was nobody who'd done what we were doing and survived it."

"And now?"

"Now there's Scott. Now there's us. Now there's a league that has a commissioner who says the right things and a culture that's changing and a team that stood in front of my husband at an airport. But it took fifteen years to get here, and for most of those fifteen years, the cost of being seen would have been everything."

Bruneau nodded. He wrote. The pen moved across the page in the neat handwriting of a man who had been taking notes in interviews for twenty years.

Then he turned to Ilya.

"Mr. Rozanov. I need you to tell me about Russia."

Ilya's hand went to the cross. Not pressing — resting. The thumb against the gold through his shirt.

"What do you want to know?"

"Why you left. What you're afraid of if you go back. What Russia has done, specifically, to you and to your family. I need the full picture."

Shane watched Ilya. The jaw working. The eyes on Bruneau — steady, but Shane could see the cost of the steadiness, the effort it took to hold still when the body wanted to move.

Ilya talked.

He talked about his father. Grigori — the violence, the belt, the trip to the labor camp at nine years old when Grigori had driven Ilya to the fence and told him *this is what happens to people who forget they are Russian*. He talked about his mother. Irina — the depression, the silence, the morning when Ilya was twelve and she didn't come out of the bedroom and the door was locked and by the time someone opened it, she was gone. He talked about the cross. How she'd given it to him the Christmas before, and how he'd worn it every day since, and how the weight of it against his sternum was the only thing he had left of her.

He talked about hiding. The decade of hotel rooms, the performed heterosexuality, the women he'd dated publicly while loving Shane in private. He talked about Svetlana — not by name, just "a woman I was close with, who knew, who helped me hide." He talked about the day he was traded to Ottawa, and the year it took to stop being afraid to sleep in the same bed as Shane with the curtains open.

He talked about Russia's response to the kiss. Article 6.21. The investigation. The threatening phone call — *twenty years in a labor colony, Mr. Rozanov.* The shooting. The consular officers at the door. The enemy-of-state designation. The passport.

"My brother," Ilya said. His voice had changed — lower, thicker, the accent pulling at the consonants. "Alexei. He is police officer in Moscow. Wife and daughter. I have not spoken to him in four months because if I contact him, Russia uses it. My brother's daughter is six. I've only met her once."

The room was quiet. Bruneau's pen had stopped.

"I cannot go back to Russia," Ilya said. "Not because I am afraid of what they will do to me — though I am afraid. Because if I go back, they win. They prove that a man can love another man publicly, legally, in a country that allows it, and still be dragged back to a country that does not. I am not going back. I am staying here. In Canada. With my husband. In our home."

He looked at Shane. The hazel eyes. Shane's hand was on the arm of the chair and his knuckles were white and he hadn't noticed until now.

"Canada is the first country that wanted me," Ilya said. "Not the hockey player. Not the number one draft pick. Me."

Bruneau sat with it. He didn't rush. He was the kind of interviewer who understood that silence after testimony was not dead air — it was respect.

"Thank you, Mr. Rozanov," he said.

Then his face changed. Not dramatically — a shift in the jaw, a resettling. The transition from interviewer to messenger, from the man asking questions to the man delivering news he didn't want to deliver.

"I need to tell you something," Bruneau said. "Both of you."

Melinda leaned forward. Martin's hand went to his pen.

"Global Affairs Canada has received formal communication from the Russian Ministry of Justice regarding your case. They're applying diplomatic pressure — citing the extradition request, the enemy-of-state classification, and what they're calling 'irregularities' in the expedited citizenship process. Their position is that Canada is granting preferential treatment to a Russian national under criminal investigation."

"There is no criminal investigation," Martin said. "The charges are fabricated."

"I know that. Global Affairs knows that. But the communication is on the record, and it has to be addressed through channels."

Shane's jaw tightened. "What does that mean for the timeline?"

"The timeline holds. The Minister has been clear — this case is not being delayed by Russian diplomatic posturing." Bruneau paused. "But there's something else."

He opened a different folder. Newer. The paper inside looked like it had been printed that morning.

"Three Members of Parliament — Drupal, Mickelson, and Bouvier — have written to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. They're requesting a formal hearing on Ilya's asylum application. They want the committee to call Mr. Rozanov to testify."

The room went still.

"On what grounds?" Martin said.

"They're calling it oversight. 'Ensuring the integrity of the immigration process.' Their letter references — " Bruneau looked at the paper — "'concerns about preferential treatment of high-profile applicants' and 'the undue influence of public advocacy campaigns on ministerial decisions.'"

Shane knew what those words meant. He'd grown up in Ottawa. His dad had spent thirty years in government. He knew the language of political interference when it wore a procedural suit. *Preferential treatment* meant *special treatment for the gay athlete*. *Undue influence of advocacy campaigns* meant *the Hockey Queens Legion and everyone who supported us.*

"They want to put my husband in front of a parliamentary committee," Shane said. His voice was level. He was making it level. "So they can ask him questions designed to discredit his case on live television."

"CPAC broadcasts committee hearings," Bruneau said. "Yes."

"Can they compel him?" Melinda said.

"The committee can issue a summons. It's rare for immigration cases. But these are unusual circumstances, and Drupal is the ranking opposition member on CIMM."

Martin's pen was tapping the legal pad. The rhythm was steady. The rhythm of a man thinking faster than the pen could move.

"This is theatre," Martin said. "Drupal knows the asylum claim is solid. He's not trying to defeat it legally — he's trying to defeat it politically. Put Ilya on camera, let Mickelson and Bouvier ask loaded questions about 'the gay agenda' and 'alphabet mafia' pressure, clip it for social media, and poison the well."

"That's my assessment as well," Bruneau said.

"What are our options?" Shane said.

Martin looked at Melinda. Melinda looked at Martin. The sibling communication — the shorthand that happened between two people who had been arguing since childhood and could now transmit entire strategies in a glance.

"We push back through the Minister's office," Melinda said. "The expedited track was approved at ministerial level. McReady's people are supportive. We argue that a committee hearing on an active immigration file is inappropriate and sets a dangerous precedent for political interference."

"And if they push through anyway?" Shane said.

"Then Ilya testifies," Martin said. "And I sit beside him, and he tells the committee exactly what he just told Mr. Bruneau, and Drupal and Mickelson and Bouvier can ask whatever they want, and the country watches a man who was shot at explain to three politicians why he deserves to live in their country."

Martin looked at Ilya. "They think a hearing helps them. They're wrong."

Ilya had been quiet through this. His hand on the cross. His face still — the still that Shane had learned to read, the still that meant Ilya was processing at a depth that didn't reach the surface.

"Is like Real Hockey," Ilya said. "Goalie. Wrap the hate in procedure. Call it questions."

"Yes," Martin said. "Exactly like that."

"I will testify," Ilya said. "If they call me, I will go."

"Ilya—" Shane started.

"Shane." The hazel eyes turned to him. "I sat in this office in June and told Terence Bruneau why I married you. I can sit in a room and tell three politicians why I want to be Canadian. They are not scarier than Russia. They are not scarier than my father."

Shane closed his mouth. Ilya was right. Shane knew Ilya was right. The instinct to protect — to step between Ilya and the thing that would hurt him — was so deep in Shane's wiring that it fired before

his brain could catch it, and sometimes the firing was the wrong response, and this was one of those times.

"Okay," Shane said.

Bruneau closed both folders. "The citizenship interview is complete. Your testimony is on the record. I'll process it today and the file goes to the decision-maker this week."

He stood. They stood. Bruneau shook Ilya's hand and held it.

"For what it's worth," Bruneau said. "And I shouldn't say this, but I'm going to — I've been doing this job for twenty years. Hundreds of interviews. Thousands of files." He looked at Ilya. "I've never had a case where the answer was more obvious."

The game was Thursday. Toronto Guardians, home, seven o'clock.

Shane taped his stick in the locker room. YUNA on the blade. Across the room, Ilya was doing his own ritual — the Cyrillic letters, *солнышко*, the ring off the hand, the kiss, the chain. The room filling up. Wyatt's pads in order. Zane's Tupperware — curry this time, Cassie's recipe, the smell competing with the tape and the equipment and the sweat that lived in every locker room in every barn in every city.

Luca was quiet in his stall. Foot tapping. Whatever Luca did before games — the internal preparation, the Swiss precision, the twenty-three-year-old who had spent the summer becoming the player the league was about to learn to fear.

The building was full. Shane could feel it from the room — the vibration, the hum, the sixteen thousand people settling into seats. The first home game had been electric. The second had been focused. This one — the third, the first since the road trip, the first since LaGuardia and the passport and the court order — this one felt different. The building was waiting.

Wiebe gave the pregame. Short. "Home ice. Our crowd. Play our game."

Fred had the board. The magnets. Toronto's forecheck had been aggressive this season — new coach, new system, the kind of press that clogged the neutral zone and forced turnovers. Fred's answer was quick breakouts and D-to-D passes that bypassed the pressure.

They went out.

The crowd was loud. The kind of loud that had weight — not just volume but intention, sixteen thousand people who had paid for tickets and read the headlines and were here, tonight, because they wanted to be in the room. Shane scanned the stands during warmups. The Centaurs jerseys. The signs — HOLLANOV, with a heart. A Ukrainian flag next to a Canadian flag. ILYA IS HOME, in red letters.

And scattered through the sections, like raisins in bread — the other signs. The ones turned facedown by security before Shane could read them, the ones confiscated at the door. He saw a cluster in section 212. Six people, maybe seven. Wearing matching black. No jerseys. They were watching the warmup the way you watch something you're waiting to disrupt.

Shane registered it and moved on. Jensen was in the building. Marie was in the building. Arena security had been briefed by Harris. Whatever was going to happen had been anticipated. That was the world now — every game was both a game and an event, every barn was both a rink and a venue, and the space between sport and politics had collapsed to nothing.

The puck dropped.

Toronto came out hard. The new forecheck — aggressive, physical, the kind of press that made you earn every inch of ice. Shane's first shift was a grind. Board battle along the near wall, the Toronto

winger riding him into the glass, the puck squirting loose and nobody clean on it. Whistles. Faceoffs. The chess of the neutral zone.

Shane won the draw. Pushed it back to Dykstra. Dykstra to Chouinard, stretch pass up the middle — Ilya took it in stride and drove wide. The Toronto defenseman stepped up. Ilya pulled around him. Cut to the net. Shot.

Pad save. Rebound. Luca was there — crashing the net, the stick on the ice, the puck on his blade. He buried it. First shot on goal for Ottawa.

Luca skated past Shane. The fist bump. The face — young, alive, the face of a twenty-three-year-old who had just scored in front of sixteen thousand people and was not pretending to be casual about it.

The building roared.

Shane scored on the power play four minutes later. One-timer from the left circle, the puck rising over the glove and hitting the back of the net with the sound that never got old no matter how many thousands of times he'd heard it. 2-0.

The period ended with Ottawa up by two and Toronto looking outclassed. Between periods, Fred kept it simple — same system, same pressure, don't let up.

Second period. Shane was on the bench when it happened.

The play was in the Toronto zone. Ilya had the puck along the wall. The crowd was up, the noise building, a scoring chance developing — and then something arced over the glass from section 212.

Shane saw it before he understood it. A red shape. Falling. The size of a softball, wobbling in the air the way balloons wobble. It hit the ice ten feet from Ilya and burst.

Red.

The spray of it — across the white ice, the bright arterial red fanning out in a shape that looked like nothing and looked like everything. Another one came. And another. Three, four, five — balloons sailing over the glass from the section where the people in black had been sitting, each one bursting on impact, each one painting the ice in thick, dark red that was not paint.

Blood. Animal blood. The smell hit Shane from the bench — iron, copper, the thick organic reek of something that had recently been alive.

The refs blew the whistles. Play stopped. Ilya was standing in the middle of it. The blood on the ice around him, on his skates, a splash across his shin pads. He was looking down at his feet. Not moving. The stick in his hands.

The building went silent for one second. Then the noise came — not cheering, not booing, something else. The sound of sixteen thousand people understanding what they were seeing and not knowing what to do with it.

Shane stood. The bench. The boards. His hand on the dasher. He couldn't get to Ilya — the ice was between them, and the refs were blowing whistles, and arena security was already moving toward section 212 where the people in black were standing, some of them with their arms raised, one of them shouting something Shane couldn't hear over the noise.

Ilya looked up from the ice. Found Shane. The hazel eyes across the rink.

Shane's hand tightened on the boards. He didn't look away.

"I'm right here," Shane said. Not loud enough for Ilya to hear. Loud enough for himself.

They were escorted out fast — the group in section 212, seven of them, surrounded by arena security and two Ottawa police officers who had been stationed at the concourse. Shane watched from the bench as they were walked up the stairs. One of them — a man, maybe thirty, buzz cut, a black windbreaker — turned and looked at the ice as he was led away. He was smiling.

The Zamboni came out. The ice crew. The process of cleaning blood off ice was mechanical — hot water, scraping, flooding. It took twenty minutes. The building was not silent during those twenty minutes. It was buzzing, murmuring, the collective processing of people who had come to watch hockey and had watched something else.

Shane sat on the bench. Beside him, Wyatt was gripping his blocker so hard the leather was creasing. Zane's jaw was set. Luca was staring at the ice where the crew was working, his face blank in a way that Shane recognized as shock — the face of a young man who had not yet learned to hide the impact of things.

Wiebe walked behind the bench. He put his hand on Shane's shoulder. Didn't speak. The hand was heavy. The hand said *I know*.

The ice was clean. The refs conferred. The PA system announced the resumption of play. The building made a noise — not a cheer, not yet. A sound of readiness. A sound that said *we are still here.*

Shane looked across the ice at Ilya, who was in position for the faceoff. The blood was off the ice but Shane could still see where it had been. Ilya couldn't see where it had been. Ilya was looking at the puck. His gloves on his stick. His body in the stance.

The puck dropped.

Ilya won the draw.

Ottawa played the rest of the game like something had been unlocked. Not angry hockey — Shane had played angry hockey and this wasn't that. This was the other thing. The thing that happened

when a team stopped playing for points and started playing for a reason. Every shift had an edge. Every board battle went to a Centaur. Wyatt stopped everything that came near him — fourteen saves in the second and third combined, three of them spectacular, one of them a pad stack on a two-on-one that drew a roar from the building that Shane felt in his teeth.

Ilya scored at 8:14 of the third. Speed down the right wing, the cut inside, the shot that was already in the net before the goalie moved. He didn't celebrate. He skated to the bench. Tapped his chest — the cross, the ring, the chain — and sat down.

3-0.

Shane scored again two minutes later. A feed from Zane in the slot, a wrister that found the top corner. 4-0. Zane grabbed Shane's jersey at the bench and pulled him in and didn't say anything and didn't need to.

Ilya added another with three minutes left. A breakaway off a Toronto turnover — pure speed, the deke to the backhand, the puck slipping under the goalie's arm. 5-0. The building was on its feet and didn't sit down.

The horn sounded. 5-0 Ottawa. Shane was on the ice for the final seconds and when the horn went, he found Ilya, and Ilya found him, and they stood at center ice for a moment while the building rained noise around them.

Ilya's face was still. The still that meant deeper.

In the locker room, Harris was waiting. Phone in hand. The look that Harris wore when the information was moving faster than his ability to organize it, which almost never happened, which meant the information was moving very fast.

"Seven arrests," Harris said. "All from the same group. Jinky tracked them — they organized on a Facebook group called Reclaim The Rink. Private group, two hundred and fourteen members. The blood was pig's blood. They bought it from a butcher in Gatineau. Cash. The butcher didn't ask."

"How did they get it in?" Shane said.

"Hydration packs. The kind you wear under a jacket, with a tube. Security checked bags but didn't pat down. They filled the balloons in the bathroom and carried them in their pockets."

"Has this happened before?" Wiebe said.

"Nothing like this. Not in the NHL. Not in any North American professional sport that I can find."

The room absorbed it. Sixteen guys in various states of undress, still holding the game in their bodies, and now holding this too.

Harris's phone had not stopped vibrating. He looked at it, scrolled, looked at Shane.

"It's everywhere," Harris said. "Every network. Every sports desk. TSN, Sportsnet, ESPN — they're all running it. The clip of the balloons hitting the ice is the lead on every ten o'clock newscast in the country."

"And?" Shane said.

"And it's not close. The condemnation is universal. The NHLPA released a statement twenty minutes ago — 'an act of hatred that has no place in our sport or our society.' Commissioner Villeneuve-Trudeau called it 'a desecration of the game' and announced a league-wide security review. The Guardians organization issued a statement — their own team, Shane. Toronto's front office said they were 'disgusted' and are cooperating with Ottawa police."

Harris scrolled further. "Scott Hunter posted on Instagram. Just a photo of Ilya from the warmup with the caption 'My friend. My colleague. My brother in this league. What happened tonight is not hockey.' Two million likes in the first hour. Leah Campbell quote-tweeted the clip and wrote 'If you watched this and felt anything other than rage, check yourself.' Ryan Price — " Harris paused. "Ryan posted for the first time in six months. Just wrote 'I played with Ilya Rozanov. He is one of the best men I know. This is what they do to the best men.'"

The locker room was quiet. Luca was sitting in his stall with his head in his hands. Wyatt was staring at his pads. Zane was dressed and standing by the door like he was waiting for someone to tell him what to do, which Zane never did, which meant Zane was as lost as everyone else.

"Top Shelf?" Shane said.

"Fitz posted a voice memo. Ninety seconds. Said 'There is no both sides to this. There is no conversation. You throw blood at a hockey player, you are not a hockey fan. You are not my listener. You are nothing.' Brewer co-signed."

"Two Hockey Chicks?"

"Sammy got very upset and couldn't speak. Trix had to finish it."

Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya was in his stall, still in his gear, his helmet on the shelf. His hands were on his knees. The cross visible at the neck of his jersey where the chain had shifted during the game.

"Real Hockey?" Shane said.

Harris's face changed. The set of his jaw — the thing Harris did when the information was bad but also satisfying, the expression of a man who had found what he'd been looking for and didn't like what he'd found but was glad he'd found it.

"Jinky cracked it," Harris said. "The Facebook group — Reclaim The Rink. The admin account traces back to a listener community that cross-posts with the Real Hockey subreddit. Same usernames, same talking points, same language. Jinky pulled the metadata on the group's founding — it was created two hours after Real Hockey Episode 22, the one where Goalie said 'somebody needs to show these people that the rink belongs to us.'"

"Goalie," Shane said. "Do we have a name?"

Harris looked at his phone. Then at Shane. "Jinky cross-referenced IP data from the subreddit mods with the Hockey Queens Legion database and the listener analytics we pulled from the ad network. She got matches on all three hosts."

He turned the phone so Shane could see. Three names. Three photos. Minor league headshots, the kind every team takes during training camp.

"Mick Grossman. That's Puck. Played four seasons in the ECHL, bounced between three teams, never got called up. Retired in 2019. Lives in Barrie, Ontario. Sells insurance."

"Jimmy Hardaway. That's Blade. Two seasons AHL, defenseman. Knee injury, done at twenty-four. Runs a hockey training camp in Sudbury. The irony is not lost on me."

Harris paused on the third photo. "Randy Summers. That's Goalie."

Shane looked at the photo. A face he didn't recognize. Late twenties in the headshot — younger now than the voice on the podcast sounded. Blond hair, a jaw that looked like it had been in a few fights, the expression of a man who was trying to look like a hockey player in a photo and succeeding just enough to make the failure hurt.

"He was never drafted," Harris said. "Went to the 2009 combine. Didn't get picked."

The 2009 draft. Shane was picked second overall. Ilya was picked first.

Shane sat with it. A man who'd gone to the same draft, stood in the same building, watched his name not get called while two teenagers — one Canadian, one Russian — heard theirs called first and second. Fifteen years later, those two teenagers were married to each other, playing in the NHL, and the man who wasn't drafted was sitting in a basement somewhere in Ontario recording a podcast about why they didn't deserve any of it.

It didn't excuse anything. It didn't explain enough. But it was there — the shape of the thing underneath the hate, the wound that had calcified into ideology.

"The podcast has been silent for five days," Harris said. "Since before the game. Jinky thinks they knew the Reclaim The Rink action was coming and went dark to create distance. But the connection is documented. Screenshots, metadata, cross-referenced accounts. Martin has everything."

"Give it to Martin," Shane said. "And give it to the Commissioner's office. And give it to the police."

"Already done."

Shane's phone buzzed. His dad. A text. Four words: *We need to talk*

Shane looked at the text. His dad didn't text like this. His dad texted in full sentences with correct punctuation and occasionally formal sign-offs. Four words with no period meant his dad was typing fast, which meant his dad was not calm.

He thought about dinner — his dad's quietness, the turned-down volume, the something behind the eyes. Shane had read it as tiredness. As rhythm. As his dad being his dad.

Shane had been wrong.

He pocketed the phone. Showered. Dressed. Put the ring back on. Went home with his husband and didn't sleep again, which was becoming a habit, which was becoming the only thing Shane knew how to do — lie in the dark and hold on and wait for the next day to bring whatever the next day would bring.

Anya was on the bed. Between them. Her small body warm at their feet, her breathing slow, her anxiety medicated and managed the way Shane wished everything could be medicated and managed and kept breathing in the dark.

Ilya was on his back. Staring at the ceiling.

"I can still smell it," Ilya said.

Shane didn't answer right away. He could too. The iron. Under the shower, under the soap, under everything — the copper tang that had gotten into his sinuses during the twenty minutes they sat on the bench watching the ice crew work.

"Pig's blood," Shane said. Like naming it would make it smaller.

It didn't.

Ilya's hand found Shane's. The rings. The dark. The house holding them. Anya between their feet, breathing slow.

Shane's phone was on the nightstand. His dad's text still unanswered. Four words with no period.

He'd deal with it in the morning. He'd deal with all of it in the morning.

Ilya

Chapter 19: Ilya

A diner on Bank Street. A man who has never pulled a chain. A hearing room with gray carpet and seven microphones. And on a Tuesday, in a kitchen that smells like his mother's soup, a phone call that changes everything.

The diner was on Bank Street, south of the Glebe, in a stretch of Ottawa that Ilya had driven through a hundred times and never stopped. It had wood paneling and vinyl booths and a laminated menu with photos of the food, which Ilya generally considered a warning sign but which David had chosen for reasons that had nothing to do with the food.

David was sitting in the back booth when they arrived. He was already drinking coffee. He was wearing an old canvas jacket — no brand visible, something that said fishing trip, not Treasury Board. He looked like someone's retired uncle, which Ilya suspected was the point.

"I've never been here," Shane said. "I've lived in Ottawa my entire life and I've never been here."

"Good," David said. "That's why I picked it."

They sat. Ilya across from David. Shane beside Ilya. The waitress brought coffee without asking and left menus and didn't come back. David had been here before. David had sat in this booth before. This was where David Hollander met people when he didn't want to meet them anywhere else, and Ilya understood this without being told, because Ilya had grown up in a country where men had booths.

David put both hands around his coffee cup. He looked at Ilya, then at Shane, then at the table.

"I can make them back off," David said.

The diner was quiet. The radio behind the counter was playing something from the eighties. A truck passed on Bank Street and the windows rattled.

"Drupal, Mickelson, Bouvier," David said. "I can make them withdraw the request for the hearing. I can make the letter disappear. Not legally — I don't mean anything illegal. But I have relationships. I've been in this city a long time. People owe favors. Some of those people owe me specifically, and some of them owe people who owe me, and the chain is long enough that if I pull it, the hearing goes away and nobody can trace it back to this table."

Shane was looking at his father. Ilya was looking at David's hands. They were steady — where Shane got it from, probably, the Hollander hands that didn't shake — but the steadiness right now was costing something. Ilya could see it in the tendons. The grip on the mug.

"How?" Shane said.

"Drupal has ambitions. He wants a cabinet position if his party forms government. There are people in the party leadership who will listen to me — not because I'm asking, but because a phone call from the right person at the right time reminds Drupal that grandstanding on a human rights case is not the path to cabinet. Mickelson follows Drupal. If Drupal pulls out, Mickelson folds. Bouvier is the ideologue — she'd push it alone but she doesn't have the votes without the other two."

David looked at Ilya. "I can have three phone calls made by tomorrow morning. The hearing will be quietly withdrawn by end of week. The committee will issue a statement about 'respecting the

integrity of ongoing immigration proceedings' and nobody will remember it happened."

"And the cost?" Ilya said.

David was quiet. He drank his coffee. Set it down. The handle at three o'clock.

"The cost is that I become the kind of person who does this," David said. "I've spent thirty years in government service. I've never called in a personal favor. I've never used a relationship to influence an outcome. I've never—" He stopped. The jaw working. He looked like Shane when Shane was trying not to say something too fast. "I've sat in offices with people who do this every day and I've watched them and I've thought, *that's not me*. And it hasn't been. Until now."

Shane leaned forward. "Dad."

"I'm telling you what it costs because I want you to know I've thought about it. And I'll do it anyway. For Ilya. For both of you. I'll pick up the phone and I'll do it and it will work and I will live with it."

The diner. The vinyl. The radio. The truck sounds from Bank Street. David's hands on the coffee cup.

Ilya had grown up watching men make this calculation. His father had made it — not for love, but for power, for the idea that the right leverage in the right hands could make the world bend. Sergei Vetrov had made it, and his father before him, and every man Ilya had ever known in Russia who believed that principles were a luxury and results were a necessity. The whole country ran on it. The whole system. You pulled the chain because the chain was there and if you didn't pull it, someone else would.

And here was David Hollander, a man who had set four plates at the kitchen table since the day Ilya first came to this house, a man who played chess with him on Sunday afternoons and never let him win, a man who had shaken Ilya's hand at the door every time he arrived

and hugged him every time he left — here was this man, offering to become someone else. For Ilya.

"No," Ilya said.

David looked at him.

"David. No."

"Ilya—"

"I know what it costs. I grew up in a country where this is how everything works. Every decision, every appointment, every outcome — someone makes a phone call. Someone pulls a chain. And the people who pull the chains become the chains, and the system eats them, and twenty years later they are sitting in offices wondering when they stopped being the person they used to be."

Shane's hand was on Ilya's thigh under the table. Not gripping. Resting.

"You are not that person," Ilya said. "I will not let you become that person for me. Your son married me. Your wife cooks me dinner. You play chess with me and you are the only person who can beat me, and I am including Shane in this, who is terrible at chess—"

"I'm not terrible at chess."

"You are terrible at chess. Your father beats me and you cannot beat your father and you cannot beat me. This is not the point." Ilya looked at David. "The point is that I came to this country because it is different. Because the system works. Because a man can sit in a government office and answer questions honestly and the honest answers are enough. If we win this with phone calls and favors, we have not won. We have just moved to a nicer version of the same thing."

David's hands had stopped being steady. Not shaking — just still. The held stillness of a man who had offered everything he had and been told no.

"I will go to the hearing," Ilya said. "Martin will sit beside me. I will answer every question Drupal and Mickelson and Bouvier can think of. And if they are better than me — if they find the question I cannot answer — then we deal with that. But we deal with it clean. We fight fair."

David looked at Shane.

"He's right," Shane said. The words came out rough. "I hate that he's right. But he's right."

David nodded. He picked up his coffee. Drank. Set it down.

"You're a good man, Ilya," David said.

"I learned from good men. One of them is sitting across from me."

David's jaw tightened. He picked up the menu.

"We should order something," he said. "We're in a diner."

They ordered. Ilya got eggs. Shane got oatmeal. David got toast and didn't eat it. The waitress refilled their coffee and they sat in the back booth of a diner on Bank Street that David had been coming to for years and that Ilya would remember for the rest of his life.

The airport was early. Five-thirty. October dark. The car smelled like Jensen's coffee and Marie's hand lotion and the leather of the back seat where Ilya was sitting with Shane's hand in his.

Jensen drove. Marie was in the passenger seat, her phone in her hand, tracking three security feeds while looking like she was

checking the weather. The car moved through Ottawa in the dark. The canal. The Rideau. The city still asleep.

Shane's bag was in the trunk. His stick bag. The away suit in the garment bag. Boston, Tampa, Detroit. Seven days. Three games.

"I can stay," Shane said.

"No."

"Wiebe can—"

"No. You go. The team needs their center. Wiebe needs you on the ice. If you stay, Drupal uses it. 'Hollander skips games to coach husband through hearing.' We give them nothing."

"I don't like leaving you alone for this."

"Am not alone. Martin is there. Melinda is there. Harris, Farrah, Jinky. Your parents." Ilya pressed Shane's hand. "Your father will be in the room. Your mother will be in the room. If three politicians are not nervous about me, they will be nervous about them."

Shane was quiet. The highway. The dark. The car moving toward the place where Shane would get out and Ilya would not.

"You take care of the team," Ilya said. "I take care of this. We are doing two things at the same time. Is what married people do."

"Married people usually aren't testifying before parliamentary committees."

"We are not usual married people."

Shane turned his head. Looked at Ilya in the dark of the back seat. The black hair, the dark eyes, the freckles that were invisible in this light but that Ilya knew were there because he knew every inch of this face the way he knew the ice.

"Call me," Shane said. "After."

"I will call you after."

"Call me during if you need to."

"I will not need to. But I will call you after."

Jensen pulled up to departures. The car stopped. The engine running. The dark and the airport lights and the other cars and the world already moving toward the day.

Shane kissed him. Not long. Not performative. Ilya held the back of Shane's neck. Held it an extra second.

"Call me after the game," Ilya said.

"Every night."

"Okay. Every night before you go to bed."

Shane got out. Got his bags from Jensen. Stood on the curb. He looked back at the car — the suit bag over his shoulder, the bag at his feet. Then he turned and walked inside. Ilya watched until he couldn't see him anymore.

The car pulled away. Marie looked back at Ilya.

"Home?" she said.

"Home."

The drive back was quiet. Ilya sat in the back seat alone. The space where Shane had been was warm.

CPAC started broadcasting at 10 a.m.

The room was smaller than Ilya expected. He'd imagined something grand — vaulted ceilings, dark wood, the architecture of consequence. What he got was a conference room in the Wellington Building with fluorescent lights and a long table and microphones and bland government furniture. The carpet was gray. The walls were gray.

Martin was beside him. Dark suit, the Clark Kent glasses, a legal pad with notes that Martin had not looked at once since they sat down because Martin did not need notes. Martin operated the way Ilya played hockey — the preparation was invisible, embedded in the body, available on demand.

Behind them, in the gallery: Melinda in her charcoal blazer. Yuna in a navy dress, her hair pulled back, the face that Ilya had seen across a hundred family dinners now set to something harder and more public. David beside her in his gray suit, glasses, the Ottawa Citizen folded on his knee as if he'd brought something to read in case the proceedings got dull. Harris with his phone, not looking at it, which meant he was disciplining himself. Farrah in something expensive and precise. Jinky, who had dressed up for the occasion in what appeared to be a black blazer over a Hockey Queens Legion t-shirt, which Ilya appreciated.

David looked like what he was — a man who had spent thirty years in the rooms where decisions were made and who had chosen to sit in this room today because his son-in-law was in it. Yuna looked like what she was — a woman who had not missed a single thing that mattered in her family's life and was not about to start.

Shane was watching. Ilya knew this the way he knew the ice was cold. Somewhere in Boston, in a hotel room or a training facility or the back of a bus, Shane Hollander had CPAC on, and his hands were probably not steady, and he was probably already counting every question and every answer and every pause.

The committee members entered. Seven of them — four from the government side, three opposition. Drupal first. Then Mickelson.

Then Bouvier.

One of the government-side members — a younger man, maybe forty, with the fidgety energy of someone who didn't want to be in the room — caught Ilya's eye. He was shuffling papers and wouldn't look at the gallery and his mouth was tight. Ilya read him as hostile. Another one who'd rather not be here. Another politician who thought this was a distraction from real work.

Drupal saw David.

Ilya was always watching. And what Ilya saw was this: Drupal's eyes found David Hollander in the second row and something happened to Drupal's posture. Not a flinch. More like a recalculation.

Mickelson saw it too. He looked at Drupal. Drupal didn't look back.

Ilya wondered, not for the first time, what exactly his father-in-law had done for the government of Canada for thirty years. The Treasury Board was budgets, policy frameworks, government spending. It was not, as far as Ilya understood, the work that made opposition politicians go stiff in their chairs. And yet.

Maybe David was secretly James Bond.

The chair — a government member, a woman named Pelletier with short silver hair and the manner of someone who intended to keep things moving — called the hearing to order. She read the purpose into the record. The Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. Review of expedited processing procedures in high-profile cases. Mr. Ilya Rozanov had been invited to provide testimony.

Invited. Not summoned. Someone — Martin, Melinda, the PM's office — had negotiated that language. The difference between being called to testify and being invited to testify was the difference between being a subject and being a guest.

"Mr. Rozanov," Pelletier said. "Thank you for being here. The committee has some questions regarding your immigration file and the circumstances of its expedited processing. Your counsel is present?"

"Martin Sotto," Martin said. "Human rights counsel for Mr. Rozanov."

"Noted. Mr. Drupal, you have the floor."

Drupal adjusted his microphone. He had notes. He had a binder. The binder was thick and tabbed and Ilya thought of Shane's folder and the thought made him miss Shane — a physical tug, sternum-level. But Shane was watching. Shane was in Boston with his eyes on a screen, and that was enough. That had to be enough.

"Mr. Rozanov," Drupal said. "Thank you for joining us today."

"Thank you for having me."

"I want to start with some basic facts. You are a Russian citizen, correct?"

"I am Russian-born. I am a permanent resident of Canada. My citizenship application is pending."

"And your permanent residency was obtained through your marriage to Mr. Hollander?"

"My permanent residency was obtained through the legal process available to spouses of Canadian citizens, yes."

"A process that was expedited."

"A process that followed the timeline established by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada."

Drupal shifted his papers. "Mr. Rozanov, are you aware that the average processing time for citizenship applications in Canada is currently twelve to eighteen months?"

"I am aware."

"And are you aware that your application has been flagged for expedited processing, reducing that timeline significantly?"

"I am aware. The expedited processing was approved by the Minister's office based on the security circumstances of my case."

"The security circumstances." Drupal leaned back. "You're referring to the situation with Russia."

"I am referring to the fact that the Russian Federation has declared me an enemy of the state, revoked my passport, filed an extradition request, sent consular officers to my home, and that I was shot at in a parking lot in July. Yes. The security circumstances."

A sound from the gallery. Not a laugh — more like a collective exhale. Drupal's jaw tightened.

"Mr. Rozanov, some have suggested that the public advocacy campaign surrounding your case — the so-called Hockey Queens Legion, the media attention, the involvement of high-profile public figures — has created political pressure on the Minister's office to fast-track your application. How do you respond to that?"

"I respond that I did not create the Hockey Queens Legion. I did not ask anyone to advocate for me. I did not call a single journalist, a single politician, a single public figure. I played hockey. I married my husband. Russia tried to destroy my life. Canadians responded. If you are asking me whether I am responsible for the fact that Canadians care about what happens to people in their country, then no, Mr. Drupal. I am not responsible for that. Canadians are responsible for that. It is one of the reasons I want to be one."

Drupal looked at his notes. He turned a page. He was regrouping.

Mickelson took the next round. Softer approach. The questions were about logistics — Ilya's travel schedule, his time spent outside

Canada for away games, whether his NHL contract constituted a "genuine" commitment to Canadian life or a temporary professional arrangement.

Ilya answered everything. Dates, numbers, specifics. Shane's spreadsheet — the one Ilya had watched Shane build in the kitchen, color-coded, green for days that counted — was in Martin's file, and Martin slid it across the table when Mickelson asked about physical presence, and Mickelson looked at it and did not ask another question about physical presence.

Then Bouvier.

She was the one Ilya had been waiting for. Drupal was calculating. Mickelson was following. Bouvier believed what she was saying. Her questions would not be about process. They would be about principle.

"Mr. Rozanov," Bouvier said. "You've spoken about your fear of returning to Russia. I want to understand something. Russia's position is that you violated their domestic law — specifically, Article 6.21, which restricts the promotion of nontraditional sexual relationships to minors. You kissed your husband on live television during a sporting event broadcast around the world, including in Russia, where minors could have been watching. Is it your position that you should face no consequences for violating the law of your country of origin?"

The room went still. Martin's hand moved toward the microphone. Ilya put his hand on Martin's wrist. Held it. Martin looked at him. Ilya shook his head.

"Ms. Bouvier," Ilya said. "I kissed my husband because I had just won the Stanley Cup with him and I love him. I did not think about Article 6.21. I did not think about Russian minors. I thought about the man I have loved since I was nineteen years old, who was standing next to me, who I had hidden for fifteen years, and I kissed him. If

that is a crime, then the law that makes it a crime is wrong. Not me. The law."

"You don't believe you have a responsibility to respect the laws of your country of origin?"

"I believe I have a responsibility to be a decent human being. Russia's law says that loving my husband is propaganda. Russia's law says that my existence is a threat to children. Russia sent a man to shoot me in a parking lot and four men to knock on my door and they revoked my passport and they called me an enemy of the state because I kissed someone. I do not respect that law. I do not think anyone in this room respects that law. And if you do, Ms. Bouvier, I would like you to say so on camera."

Bouvier's mouth opened. Closed. Her hand went to her water glass. She drank.

The gallery made a sound. Pelletier gaveled once.

Drupal tried again. A pivot — back to process, to the question of whether high-profile applicants received treatment unavailable to ordinary Canadians. Ilya let Martin answer the procedural parts. When Drupal directed a question specifically to Ilya — "Do you believe your celebrity status has given you advantages in this process?" — Ilya said:

"My celebrity status almost got me shot. It got my passport revoked. It got my brother silenced. It got blood thrown at me on the ice in my own arena, in front of sixteen thousand people, three days ago. If that is an advantage, Mr. Drupal, I do not want it."

Drupal had nothing after that. Mickelson had nothing after that. Bouvier attempted one more question about the "broader implications of expedited processing for public figures" and Ilya said, "I am not a public figure today. I am a man asking your country to let him stay," and Bouvier stopped asking questions.

Pelletier called a brief recess. Then the government members asked their questions — softer, supportive. *Mr. Rozanov, can you describe the impact of the Russian Federation's actions on your daily life?* He described it. *Can you tell the committee about the shooting?* He told them. The fidgety younger member — the one Ilya had read as hostile — asked the last question. His voice was unsteady.

"Mr. Rozanov, my daughter is fourteen. She has a poster of you and Mr. Hollander in her bedroom. She told me this morning that she was watching this hearing in her civics class." He stopped. Adjusted his glasses. "My question is: what would you want her to know about what it means to ask a country to accept you as you are?"

The room was very quiet.

"I would want her to know," Ilya said, "that the asking is the bravest part. And that the country that says yes is worth everything."

The hearing ended. Pelletier thanked the witness. The committee adjourned.

Martin leaned over. "You did well."

"I know."

"That wasn't a compliment. It was an observation. The compliment is: Bouvier won't recover from the 'say so on camera' moment. That clip will be everywhere by tonight."

Ilya turned his phone on in the hallway. Three missed calls from Wiebe. A text from Jinky — a row of crown emojis and nothing else. A text from Hayden — "DUDE." A text from Zane — "Captain."

And Shane.

"I watched the whole thing. You did it. And so handsome too."

Ilya read it twice. He pressed his thumb against the screen.

He typed: *"I felt you there in spirit."*

Shane's reply was immediate: *"That's the mushiest thing you've ever said to me."*

Ilya: *"I am a mushy person. You married a mushy person. This is your problem now."*

Shane: *"I like that you're mushy sometimes."*

Ilya looked up from the phone. Yuna was standing in the hallway. Her face was composed — the face she wore in public, the one that gave nothing away — but her hand was on David's arm and the grip was tight. David was looking at Ilya.

David shook his hand. Held it — the way David did at departures, the grip that said more than David would say with words.

"You didn't need my phone calls," David said.

"No," Ilya said. "But I needed you in the room."

Yuna hugged him. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to. The hug said it — the arms that had been feeding him and correcting his knitting tension and pouring him wine for three years, holding on. Ilya hugged her back.

David nodded. They let go.

The call came on a Monday.

Ilya was in the kitchen. He'd been cooking — not stress-cooking, not the frantic production of the summer, but the ordinary cooking of a man who was alone in his house with a dog and two in-laws and two security professionals and nothing to do but wait. He'd made solyanka — the thick soup with sausage and olives that his mother used to make when it rained, though Ilya's version had more heat

and fewer olives because Anya didn't like olives and Ilya had discovered this by watching Anya eat around them with the precision of a surgeon.

His phone rang. Melinda.

"Ilya."

"Melinda."

"The Minister's office called. The refugee protection determination is in. You've been granted asylum."

The kitchen. The soup on the stove. Anya on his foot. The October light through the window over the sink, gray and thin and ordinary.

"Ilya? Are you there?"

"I'm here."

"The citizenship file is being expedited to decision. Given the asylum determination and the strength of the Bruneau interview, the decision-maker is expected to approve within weeks. Not months. Weeks. Once approved, you'll be issued a Canadian passport."

His hand was on the counter. He was leaning on it. He hadn't decided to lean — his body just went there.

"Thank you, Melinda," he said.

"You don't need to thank me. You did this."

She said other things. Legal things. Next steps, paperwork, a meeting with Martin. Ilya heard all of it and none of it. He hung up the phone and stood in the kitchen and the soup was bubbling and Anya was looking up at him and the house was quiet.

He called Galina.

She answered on the second ring.

"Galina."

"*Ilyusha.* Talk to me."

"I was granted asylum."

"Yes."

"I am going to be a Canadian citizen."

"Yes."

"I am going to have a passport. A Canadian passport. They cannot take it. Russia cannot—" His voice stopped. Not broke — stopped, everything going quiet at once.

"Ilya," Galina said. "Where are you?"

"Kitchen."

"Are you alone?"

"Anya is here."

"Sit down."

He sat. On the kitchen floor. His back against the cabinet under the sink. Anya climbed into his lap immediately, her body warm, her nose against his neck, the anxious tremor starting in her hind legs because she could feel whatever was happening in him before he could.

"I am sitting," he said.

"Tell me what is happening in your body."

"I don't—" He pressed the heel of his hand against his eye. "I think I am crying."

"You are crying."

"I don't cry."

"You are crying right now, Ilyusha. This is what it feels like when you put it down."

The floor. The cabinet. The smell of the solyanka. Anya's fur against his chin. The tears coming without permission, and Galina on the phone, and the quiet that was not empty.

"I reached up my hand," he said.

Galina was quiet for a moment. "Yes," she said. "You did."

He sat on the kitchen floor for a long time. Anya did not move. Galina did not hang up. The soup went to a simmer and the house held him and the October light came through the window and landed on the floor beside him like it had nowhere better to be.

He called Shane from the couch. Video. The hotel room in Detroit — beige walls, the terrible art, Shane in a t-shirt with his hair wet from the shower.

Shane answered and looked at Ilya's face and knew.

"It came through," Shane said.

"It came through."

Shane sat on the hotel bed. He put his hand over his mouth. He was quiet for a long time.

"Tell me," Shane said.

"Minister's office called Melinda. Refugee protection granted. Citizenship being expedited to decision — weeks, not months. I will have a Canadian passport."

Shane's hand was still over his mouth. His eyes were wet. He didn't blink.

"Say it again," Shane said.

"I will have a Canadian passport."

"Again."

"Shane."

"I need to hear it one more time."

"I will have a Canadian passport. I am going to be a citizen of Canada. Russia cannot touch me. It is over."

Shane took his hand away from his mouth. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

"I should have been there," Shane said.

"You were in Tampa winning a hockey game."

"I should have been there."

"You won Tampa 4-2 and you had two assists and the podcasts are calling us a 'reign of terror,' which I think is a compliment."

"I lost Boston."

"You lost Boston 3-2 in overtime. This is acceptable."

"I should have—"

"Shane. Stop. You were where you needed to be. I was where I needed to be. We were both where we needed to be." Ilya paused. "Besides. You watched the hearing. You saw me grab Martin's wrist."

"You grabbed Martin's wrist and answered Bouvier yourself and I almost threw my phone at the wall."

"Because you were scared?"

"Because I was proud. And because you looked really good in that suit."

"You already told me this. 'So handsome too.' I have the text."

"I'll tell you every day."

"This is also not a problem."

They stayed on the video call for an hour. Shane lay on the hotel bed. Ilya lay on the couch. Anya was asleep on Ilya's feet. They talked about nothing — the hotel room, the food in Tampa, how Luca had scored again and was becoming a problem for every team in the league, how Wyatt had made a save against Boston that belonged on a highlight reel, how Zane had texted Ilya a photo of his Tupperware with the caption *jerk chicken for the citizen.* They talked until Shane's eyes started closing and Ilya said "sleep, Hollander" and Shane said "don't hang up" and Ilya didn't hang up. He watched Shane fall asleep on the hotel bed in Detroit and he lay on the couch in Ottawa and the screen glowed between them.

Ottawa won Detroit 3-1. Shane had a goal and an assist. The podcasts — the real ones, the ones that talked about hockey like it mattered because it did — were starting to use the word *dynasty*. Not seriously. Not yet. But the shape of it was there. Ottawa had won the Cup in June and had started this season like a team that intended to win it again, and the separation that was supposed to break them — the blood, the hearing, the three games without Ilya

— had done the opposite. The team had played for Ilya while Ilya played for himself, and both things had worked.

Ilya watched every game. He sat on the couch with Anya and Yuna — Yuna with her red wine and her knitting, which was a recent development that Ilya attributed to the fact that Yuna Hollander was a woman who needed her hands busy at all times and the foundation work only filled so many hours. She was making a scarf. It was purple. It was not going well, and Yuna approached the scarf with the same intensity she approached everything, which meant the scarf was both a disaster and a personal challenge she intended to win.

"Your tension is uneven," Ilya told her during the second period of the Tampa game.

"My tension is fine."

"Your tension is not fine. You are pulling too tight on the left side. This is why it curves."

"How do you know about knitting tension?"

"My mother knitted. She made me a sweater every winter. Blue, always blue, because she said blue was the color of calm and I was not a calm child." The corners of his mouth curved upward. "And you've told me."

Yuna looked at him. She unwound two rows and started again.

David came in for the third period. He sat in the armchair with his newspaper and watched the game over the top of it — from a slight distance, with full attention, the newspaper a prop that fooled nobody.

"Shane looks good," David said during a power play.

"Shane looks tired," Ilya said. "He is not sleeping."

"He's worried about you."

"I know. I told him to stop. He did not stop."

"He won't. He's a Hollander. We worry and we don't stop."

"This is a design flaw."

"It's a feature," David said, and turned a page.

Shane came home on a Thursday night. Late. Past eleven. The flight from Detroit had been delayed and Ilya had tracked it on his phone, refreshing the flight status every four minutes until Yuna told him he was going to wear out his screen.

Ilya was in the living room. He and David had been playing chess for two hours. The board was on the coffee table between them — David's queen-side attack was methodical and relentless and Ilya was three moves from losing and they both knew it. Yuna was in the armchair with the scarf and the wine. The scarf had improved. The wine had not changed. Anya was asleep on Ilya's foot.

The front door opened. The sound of a bag being set down. Keys on the hook — first thing, every time.

Shane appeared in the living room doorway. He looked like a man who had played three hockey games in seven days and flown across four time zones and cried in a hotel room in Detroit and hadn't slept properly since October.

Yuna looked up from her knitting. "Oh, hey. How was Detroit?"

"Fine."

David moved his bishop without looking up from the board. "Check."

Ilya looked at the board. Looked at David. Looked at Shane.

"Your father is cheating," Ilya said.

"I am not cheating," David said. "I am winning. You're just a sore loser."

Shane stood in the doorway. His bag was in the hallway. His coat was still on. He was looking at the room — the chess, the knitting, the wine, the dog, the fire that David had started in the fireplace because David started a fire every night in October regardless of whether the house needed one.

"There's soup," Yuna said. "Ilya made solyanka. It's in the fridge."

"I'm not hungry."

"You're always hungry after travel. Sit down. I'll heat it up."

"Mom—"

But Yuna was already up, the knitting set aside, the wine glass carried to the kitchen. Thirty-three years of feeding her son. She was not about to stop because he said he wasn't hungry.

Shane sat on the couch next to Ilya. He looked at the chess board. He looked at Ilya.

"You're losing," Shane said.

"I am not losing. I am in a strategic retreat."

"You're three moves from checkmate."

"I am aware." Ilya put his hand on Shane's knee. "Welcome home."

"Thank you, wife." Shane leaned into him. Not dramatically — just the settling of a body against the body it belonged to. The coat still on. The tiredness in every joint. Shane's head on Ilya's shoulder.

David looked at them over the chess board. He moved his rook.

"Checkmate," David said. "In two."

Ilya tipped his king. Anya opened one eye, confirmed that no food was involved, and went back to sleep.

Shane was home. The house was warm. The soup was heating. The chess was over and the hearing was over and the waiting was over and the arms that had been holding everything above his head for four months were finally, finally down.

Outside, Ottawa was dark and cold and getting colder. Winter was coming. The season was long. Russia was still Russia and the world was still the world and there were still people out there who would throw blood at you for loving someone.

But in here — in this room, with the chess and the knitting and the wine and the dog and the man whose head was on his shoulder and the parents who had become his parents and the soup on the stove — in here, Ilya Rozanov was home.

He was going to have a passport to prove it.

Shane

Chapter 20: Shane

Shane comes home from the road. Ilya has soup on the stove and a plan for the rest of the evening. The house is warm. The season is rolling. Some threads are starting to close, and some never will. Morning comes in cold and honest, and it's enough.

The fire had gone to almost nothing. Shane could hear the house the way you heard it late — the tick of the radiator, the canal wind against the windows, autumn doing its work outside while in here the lamps were low and Anya was asleep and his parents were upstairs and it was just them.

He was loose from the soup and the ginger ale, the road finally starting to drain out of him. Ilya was beside him, close enough that Shane could feel the warmth of him, and Shane was aware of that warmth the way you were aware of the sun after being inside too long — not dramatic, just registered, the body noting something it had been missing.

Ilya's thumb moved against the back of Shane's hand. Slow. Back and forth.

Shane looked at their hands. Looked at Ilya.

Ilya was already watching him. He didn't look away.

Outside, the wind came off the canal and pressed against the glass. The last of the fire shifted and settled. Anya's breathing was slow and even at their feet.

A week. Three cities. Every night Shane had called and Ilya had answered and they had talked until one of them went under, and it had been enough because it had to be enough, and now Shane was here and the house was quiet and Ilya's thumb was still moving against the back of his hand and not stopping.

Shane turned toward him.

Ilya stood, pulling Shane up with him, and they went upstairs.

The bathroom was dark. Ilya hadn't turned on the light — just the shower, the water hitting tile, steam gathering on the mirror and the glass and the chrome. The bathroom light came through from above the sink, low, and made the room gray and soft and not quite real, like the inside of something held.

Ilya undressed him. The henley — his hands at the hem, pulling it up, and Shane lifted his arms. The undershirt. The belt — Ilya's fingers on the buckle, deliberate, the leather sliding through the loops. The jeans. Ilya crouched to pull them down and his face was level with Shane's stomach and his breath was warm through Shane's boxers and he didn't stop there but Shane's body registered it. His body had been registering Ilya for fifteen years. It didn't know how to stop.

He stood in the steam in his boxers and Ilya was still dressed — the sweatpants, the ruined shirt — and the imbalance did something to him. The exposure. Being nearly bare while Ilya was clothed and calm and looking at him with an expression that was quiet and unhurried and certain.

Ilya pulled his shirt off. The chest, the breadth of his shoulders, the scar on his left side from the boards in Philadelphia. Sweatpants off. Ilya stepped into the shower and held out his hand.

Hot. Almost too hot. The temperature Ilya ran at, the one Shane had learned to want because Ilya wanted it, the way you absorb

someone's preferences across a decade until you can't remember what you'd choose alone.

Ilya washed his hair. Fingers in the wet black, working slow. Shane tipped his head back. Ilya's thumbs pressed behind his ears — the spot where the headaches started on road trips, where the tension silted up after days of bad hotel beds and fluorescent arenas. Ilya pressed and something released.

Shane's forehead found Ilya's collarbone. The water over both of them. The steam thick enough that the mirror was gone, the room was gone, there was nothing but heat and water and the smell of his own shampoo in Ilya's hands. Shane's arms hung at his sides. He was letting Ilya hold him upright, which was not something Shane Hollander did — Shane held, Shane organized, Shane managed — but here, in the dark with the water running, he let go. He gave Ilya the weight.

Ilya washed his back. Down his spine, the flat of his palm. Pressing into the muscles along his shoulder blades where Shane stored everything he didn't say out loud. His hand moved the way it moved on the ice — knowing where the space was, where the pressure needed to go. Shane made a sound into Ilya's neck. Below language.

Ilya's mouth on the back of his neck. Not a kiss — his lips resting there, warm, the water running over his shoulders and down between them. Staying.

They got out. Ilya dried him. Hair first — rough, the way Shane liked. Then his shoulders. His chest. Each arm, and Ilya held Shane's hand when he dried it, each finger, like the hand that gripped a hockey stick and held Shane's whole life together deserved that kind of attention.

Shane reached for him. Ilya caught his wrist. Not hard. Just caught it.

"Not yet. Bed. Face down."

The sheets were cool after the shower. Shane lay on his stomach and his face found the pillow and it smelled like their detergent and like Ilya and like the house. Then Ilya's hands were on his back.

Heels of his palms along Shane's spine. Into the knots across his shoulders where the shooting motion pulled everything into cable. Lower. The lats. He found the spot below Shane's right scapula — the one that had been wrong since the Tampa game, the one the team trainer worked twice a week and never fully reached — and pressed until Shane's breath left and came back changed.

"There," Shane said.

"I know, sweetheart."

His hips. Pressing, releasing. Shane went loose under it — not suddenly, the way ice loosens in spring, the slow surrender of something that had been holding its shape too long. Seven days on the road. The hotel rooms where he lay awake tracking Ilya's flight status. The months before that. The whole year. All of it was in his back, in his shoulders, in the rigid scaffolding of a body that had been braced since June, and Ilya was taking it apart with his hands.

Ilya's mouth followed. Down the spine. The small of Shane's back, where the nerves ran close to the surface, and he shivered. The curve where his back met his ass, and Ilya stayed there — mouth, breath, the faint scrape of stubble — and Shane's hips shifted against the mattress.

"Turn over."

Shane turned. And Ilya above him. It didn't matter how many times. The hazel eyes. The curls dark with water, falling across his forehead. The cleft chin. The stubble Shane could still feel on his lower back. Six-three, his shoulders wide enough to block the bathroom light, and the look on his face — focused, tender, absolute.

The expression that could not be faked or earned or deserved. Shane got it anyway.

Ilya kissed him. Slow. Hand on Shane's jaw, tilting, and the kiss was unhurried and complete. Not going anywhere because it was already where it wanted to be. Shane tasted mint, and under it the warmth that was just Ilya, that had been Ilya since they were twenty and terrified in a hotel room in Toronto when the world outside didn't know and couldn't.

Down his neck. His chest. Ilya's tongue flat across his nipple and Shane arched into it, fingers twisting in the wet curls. Lower. Below his navel. Ilya's mouth on his hip bone, the crease of his thigh, close enough that Shane felt the breath on his cock and his hips lifted and Ilya's hand pressed them back down. Gently. Firmly.

"Ilya."

"Shh."

He took Shane in his mouth. Heat and wet and the slow devastating draw that sent Shane's vision white at the edges. Ilya knew how to do this. Had known since they were twenty-two and learning each other in stolen hours between road games, and the knowledge had only gotten deeper, more precise, more ruinous. The pressure. The rhythm. The thing with his tongue on the underside that made Shane's fists close in the sheets and his thighs shake.

Shane watched. Couldn't stop. The dark lashes against Ilya's cheeks. His mouth, stretched, moving slow. The same mouth that argued with referees and told Shane he was terrible at chess and whispered Russian into Anya's fur and said *I am a mushy person, this is your problem now* — on him, unhurried, pulling him apart.

"Stop." His voice scraped. "I'm gonna come."

Ilya pulled off. Looked up. Lips swollen, shining. "Is not the point?"

"Not yet. Not like that. I want you."

Something in Ilya's face deepened. He reached across Shane to the nightstand. The drawer. The lube — same bottle, same spot, perpetually half-empty because they never remembered to buy more until they were here.

His fingers, slicked and warm. One pressing into Shane. Shane breathed through it — the stretch familiar, the thing his body knew how to open for even when the rest of him was catching up. Ilya's other hand on his thigh. Warm. Steady.

A second finger. Slow. Ilya watched Shane's face while he worked him open. Shane let him see it — the jaw loosening, the breath changing. The moment when discomfort tipped and his hips pushed back.

"More."

"Patience."

"I've been patient for seven days."

A third and Shane stopped making words. His hand found Ilya's forearm and gripped. The stretch fuller now, and his body bore down on it — not fighting, receiving, the distinction it had taken Shane years to learn because his instinct was to clench, to hold, to control, and this was the one place he'd learned the opposite.

Ilya pulled his fingers out. Slicked himself. Shane pushed him back against the headboard and climbed into his lap — knees on either side, hands on Ilya's shoulders. Ilya's breath left him. His hands went to Shane's hips.

Shane reached between them. Lined up. Sank down.

Slow. The head pushing in and Shane's mouth opened and nothing came out. Another inch. His thighs trembling. Another. Ilya's fingers

digging into his hips — not guiding, just holding, the restraint visible in the cords of his forearms.

He bottomed out. Full. Ilya all the way inside him, the stretch and the pressure and the closeness that was as deep as two people could get. Shane's forehead dropped against Ilya's. Their breath mixing. The room dark and warm and the only sounds the shower still dripping and the house settling around them.

"Okay?" Ilya. Quiet. His thumbs tracing circles on Shane's hip bones.

"Yeah." Shane rolled his hips. His breath caught. "Yeah."

He rode Ilya slow. Rising, sinking, finding the angle that narrowed everything to white heat behind his navel. Ilya's hands on his hips, Shane's on Ilya's shoulders, muscle moving under his palms. And Ilya looking up at him — open, wrecked, devoted, refusing to be anything other than what it was.

Faster. Shane's cock between them, untouched, slick against Ilya's stomach. The bed creaking. Shane's brain was empty, finally, fully empty, the inventory gone, the tracking gone, everything gone but this.

"Shane." Strained. Low. "I want—"

"Yeah."

He climbed off. The loss sharp. Turned. Hands and knees. Looked back over his shoulder and Ilya made a sound with no language in it — his hand already on Shane's hip. Behind him. Lined up. Pushed in.

Deeper at this angle. Shane dropped to his elbows and Ilya's hand pressed flat between his shoulder blades — the same hand that had washed his hair, massaged his back, dried him finger by finger — now holding him down with pressure that was firm and careful and exactly what Shane needed. Ilya moved. Long strokes. Steady. The

deliberate pace that was how he did everything — controlled, total, nothing by half.

Shane's face in the pillow. His hands in the sheets. Each thrust pushed him forward and Ilya's grip on his hip pulled him back and the rhythm was patient and relentless and Shane stopped thinking. The world collapsed to fullness, drag, build. Then Ilya's hand sliding around to wrap his cock and stroke in time.

Shane came with his face in the pillow and Ilya's name in his teeth. His whole body clenching, shaking, the orgasm wrenched from somewhere deeper than muscle.

Ilya followed. Two more thrusts — hard, deep — hips stuttering, pressing all the way in and staying. His mouth on Shane's spine. Shane's name said once, quiet, like it was everything.

They lay tangled. Shane's back against Ilya's chest. Ilya's arm across him, heavy. Their fingers laced, the rings clicking together softly in the dark.

"Welcome home," Ilya said. Into Shane's hair. Half gone already.

Shane laughed. Hoarse. "Some welcome."

"Had seven days to myself."

"You were productive, though."

"Also made soup."

"My man made soup."

Ilya's breathing slowed. The body behind Shane going heavy with sleep — the switch Ilya threw every night, awake then gone, four minutes or less. Shane felt it happen. The arm getting heavier. The breath going deep and even.

The house was quiet. His parents in the guest room. Anya outside the bedroom door, her collar jingling faintly. The shower had stopped dripping. October pressed against the windows.

Shane was tired. He was warm. He was home.

He slept.

Morning came in cold and bright. The October light through the bedroom window had no warmth in it but was honest about that.

Anya was on the bed. She'd gotten in during the night — the door didn't latch right, a fact she'd discovered her first week and exploited every night since. She was between their feet, curled tight, nose under her tail.

Ilya was asleep. On his stomach, one arm off the bed, his face turned toward Shane. The curls. The dark eyebrows. Mouth slightly open. He looked younger when he slept — the performance gone, the vigilance stripped. Just a man in his own bed.

Shane got up. Sweatpants. T-shirt. Downstairs. His body sore in the good way — back loose, hips faintly aching, the evidence of the night in his muscles.

His mom was in the kitchen. Coffee made. His dad's newspaper on the counter, open to sports. She was scrambling eggs.

"Morning," Shane said.

"Morning. Coffee's ready."

"Dad?"

"Canal."

Shane poured coffee. His mom scrambled eggs and did not look at him. Deliberate. She was granting him the mercy of not being looked

at on this particular morning. She slid the eggs across the counter.

"Harris called," she said. "While you were sleeping."

Shane took the call in the study. Door closed.

The room still felt like his dad's. Four months of David Hollander in residence had filled it — the reading glasses on the desk, the cologne faintly in the leather of the chair Shane and Ilya had bought but that his dad had claimed inside a week. Shane sat in it. Understood why his dad had claimed it.

Harris picked up on the first ring and went straight to it.

"Crown's office made a decision on the Reclaim The Rink arrests. Seven defendants. Five pleading guilty — mischief, causing a disturbance. Crown's pushing criminal harassment on the two who organized logistics. The butcher invoice, the hydration packs, the seating coordination. Those two are looking at real time."

"How much?"

"Twelve to eighteen months, Martin thinks. Judge will have the hate-crime aggravator — section 718.2, bias based on sexual orientation."

"The other five?"

"Fines. Probation. Community service. Lifetime arena bans league-wide. Commissioner's office pushed it through — they can't step foot in an NHL building in North America."

Seven people who'd smuggled animal blood into an arena and thrown it at his husband. Five would plead out. Two would go to jail. The system processing, categorizing, assigning consequences that were proportional and inadequate at the same time.

"The podcast," Shane said.

Harris paused. The pause that meant complicated.

"Jinky's metadata went to Ottawa cybercrimes and the Crown simultaneously. The connection is documented — the cross-posted usernames, the Facebook group created two hours after Episode 22, the 'somebody needs to show these people the rink belongs to us' quote."

"And?"

"Crown says it's not enough for conspiracy charges. Section 22 needs a direct link between the speech and the act. No DMs. No planning messages. No coordination between the hosts and the seven throwers. Crown's position is the podcast created a climate. Not an instruction."

Shane's jaw tightened. He'd known since the locker room. The gap between creating a climate and issuing an order was where the law stopped, and Grossman and Hardaway and Summers lived in that gap.

"So nothing," Shane said.

"Not nothing. Crown referred the file to the Attorney General — section 319, public incitement of hatred. Higher bar, rarely used, but the referral's on the record. And Martin filed civil on Ilya's behalf. Defamation, intentional infliction of emotional distress, tortious interference."

"What does the civil case do?"

"Discovery. Opens their finances, their communications, their subscriber data. Everything they've ever said in private becomes evidence. Martin's position is that even if the Crown can't reach them criminally, the civil suit dismantles them financially and puts every ugly thing they've written into the public record."

Shane thought about Randy Summers. Goalie. The man who stood at the 2009 draft and watched his name not get called while Shane went second and Ilya went first. Fifteen years later, in his mother's house in Oshawa, recording hate into a microphone.

It didn't explain enough. It never would.

"Their names are public?" Shane said.

"Since yesterday. Martin released the identification to three outlets — Citizen, Globe, TSN. Grossman's insurance company fired him within four hours. Hardaway's hockey camp lost its facility lease by end of day — the rec center pulled the contract. Summers was already unemployed. Living with his mother. She gave a statement to the Citizen saying she didn't know about the podcast." Harris paused. "That she was 'heartbroken.'"

Shane closed his eyes. A man in his mother's house. Recording poison because two decades ago the draft didn't call his name. He wanted satisfaction and what he got was the flat, heavy recognition that the system caught the hands. It couldn't reach the wound that moved them.

"The podcast's dead," Harris said. "Platform pulled it. Subreddit banned. Facebook group removed. Jinky's watching for mirrors and hasn't found any. The infrastructure's gone."

"Good."

"Commissioner's security review came down this morning. New protocols league-wide — pat-downs at every gate, bag restrictions, expanded cameras, league-funded threat assessment unit coordinating with local law enforcement. Every arena. Every game. Starting now."

Shane opened his eyes. The study ceiling. His dad's certificates on the wall — thirty years of quiet work inside the machinery.

The system did what it could. It wasn't enough. It was what they had.

"Thanks, Harris."

Shane went upstairs. Ilya was awake. Sitting up, phone on the bed beside him, Anya in his lap. He looked at Shane in the doorway and Shane could see that something had changed in the twenty minutes he'd been downstairs. Ilya's face was still. The still that meant deeper.

"Harris?" Ilya said.

Shane told him. The charges. The pleas. The two organizers facing real time. The podcast dead, names public, Grossman fired, Hardaway's camp shut down. Martin's civil suit. The Commissioner's new protocols.

Ilya listened. His thumb on Anya's ear.

"And the hosts," Ilya said. "Prison."

"Probably not. Crown can't make conspiracy stick. Martin's civil case is the play."

Ilya nodded. Looked at the window. Quiet.

"Is never enough," he said. "The law. For the thing underneath."

"No."

"But it is gone. The podcast."

"Gone."

He nodded again. Then: "Svetlana called."

The name landed in the room and Shane let it. Svetlana. He'd known her for five years — since the first time Ilya had introduced them, at a

restaurant in Montreal during a road trip, the three of them at a corner table. Shane had needed some time with that. Not long. But some.

Ilya had never hidden what he was. Bisexual, openly, to anyone who knew him well enough to ask — which in Russia meant almost no one, and in Ottawa meant the people in this house and a handful of teammates who'd figured it out and kept it. Svetlana had known since they were children. They'd grown up together, grown apart, found each other again, loved each other in the on-and-off way of two people whose timing was always slightly wrong. She was his oldest friend. She was also someone he had loved, genuinely, in the full sense of the word, in a life that had Shane in it too.

Shane had needed some time with that. He'd taken it. He was done with it.

He'd watched Ilya talk to her on the phone — the Russian, the laughter, the ease of people who had known each other before they knew themselves. He'd watched Svetlana meet Anya at the house one Christmas and get on the floor with her immediately, speaking Russian baby-talk, and Anya had loved her without question, which was Anya's clearest endorsement. He'd watched Ilya with her and understood that what they were to each other had nothing to do with what Ilya was to Shane. Different country, different life, different kind of love. All of it real.

Svetlana was part of Ilya's life. Shane was glad she was.

"She called while you were downstairs," Ilya said. "I asked her — weeks ago, I asked her to check on Alexei. Through people she trusts. People in Moscow who are not connected to me."

His hand went to the cross.

"Alexei quit the police," Ilya said.

Shane sat on the bed.

"He left Moscow. Took his wife and kid and moved to her family's province. Svetlana doesn't know exactly where — she didn't ask, because asking leaves a trail. But he is out. He is not police anymore."

"When?"

"After the enemy-of-state designation. Svetlana thinks — when the designation came, his position became impossible. A police officer whose brother is an enemy of the state. His colleagues would know. His superiors. In Russia, they would not fire him. They would make it so he chose to leave."

Shane's hand found Ilya's knee.

"He chose his family," Ilya said. "His wife's people. Somewhere smaller. Quieter."

"Safer."

"Maybe. In Russia, nothing is safe. But further from the center. And he is not police anymore, which means he is not useful anymore, which means—" Ilya stopped. "Maybe they leave him alone."

"Maybe."

Ilya was quiet. Anya shifted in his lap and he adjusted. Outside, the October light came through clean and cold.

"My niece started school," Ilya said. "In the new place. Svetlana heard this from someone. A friend of Alexei's wife."

"That's good."

"She is seven now. She started school in a province I don't know the name of because my brother had to leave Moscow because of me."

"Because of Russia."

"Because of Russia. Yes." He pressed the cross. "And because of me. Both things. I know both things are true. Galina has been very clear about this." He looked at Shane. "I still feel it."

"I know."

"Svetlana says Alexei's wife's family is there. It is not nothing. It is somewhere. It is not Moscow and it is not me but it is somewhere."

Shane didn't say *you'll meet your niece someday.* He didn't say *it'll get better.* He didn't say any of the things that would be kind and might be lies. Because Ilya wasn't asking him to fix it. Ilya was telling him what he was carrying, which was what Ilya did — held the weight alone for as long as he could, and then, when he couldn't, set it down in front of Shane. Not to make it Shane's. Just to let Shane see it.

"Okay," Shane said.

"Okay."

Anya barked. Sharp. The sound she made when patience had run out and the humans needed to address breakfast immediately.

Ilya looked at the dog. Looked at Shane.

"She is right," he said. "Enough."

They went downstairs. Ilya fed Anya. Shane poured more coffee. His mom was at the counter on her phone and did not comment on any of it, though she looked at Shane over her reading glasses with an expression that communicated several things at once, all of which she intended to keep to herself.

His dad came in from the canal. Cold on his jacket. Pink in his cheeks. He poured coffee and sat at the table and opened the

newspaper and the house moved into its morning. Four adults and a dog in a kitchen in October.

Ilya was on the floor with Anya, speaking Russian to her about the quality of her breakfast. Anya received his analysis with grave attention. She sneezed into her water bowl. Ilya laughed — the real laugh, the unguarded one, the one that showed his teeth and crinkled his eyes and made Shane's mom look up from her phone with the expression she wore when she loved someone and had no intention of saying so.

Shane leaned against the counter. The coffee was hot in his hands.

Outside, the season was rolling. Ottawa had won eight of twelve and the word *dynasty* was showing up in the sports pages, on the real podcasts, the ones that talked about hockey because they loved it. Luca was becoming the player the league would fear. Wyatt was a wall. Zane texted photos of Tupperware and called Ilya *Captain* and meant it every time.

The citizenship decision was weeks away. The folder on Laurier Avenue was moving through whatever channels folders moved through. Bruneau's pen. The Minister's signature. The machinery of a country deciding to claim someone.

Somewhere in a province Shane didn't know the name of, a man who used to be a police officer was starting over with his wife and his daughter. Shane didn't know if the little girl knew why they'd moved. He didn't know if Alexei said Ilya's name in the new house or if the name had become one of the things you didn't say. He didn't know if there would ever be a day when the gap between the brothers could close.

He didn't know. Ilya didn't know. Svetlana didn't know. Nobody knew.

But the passport was coming. And the morning was here. And Ilya was on the floor with the dog, laughing, and his mom was pretending to read her phone, and his dad was behind the newspaper seeing

everything the way his dad saw everything, and the house — their house, Shane and Ilya's house, the one they'd bought and married in and filled with the people who'd shown up when the world got bad — the house was warm and the coffee was hot and the light through the kitchen window was cold and clean and October.

Tomorrow there would be practice. A game on Thursday. The road trip next week. The world wasn't finished with them. Russia was Russia. The law reached where it could and stopped where it stopped. Brothers sent messages through women who loved them both. Seven-year-old girls started school in provinces nobody would name out loud.

But it was morning. His husband was on the floor talking to a dog. His parents were drinking coffee in his kitchen. The season was long and the team was good and the passport was coming.

Shane drank his coffee.

It was enough.

Ilya/Shane

Chapter 21: Ilya/Shane

The playoffs are rolling and the podcasts are paying attention. Ottawa is good — genuinely, dangerously good — and the hockey world is starting to use words like dynasty without apologizing for it. Spring comes in. The security detail is gone. The house is just theirs again. Something arrives in the mail.

"Welcome back to Top Shelf. I'm Fitz, he's Brewer, and we're recording this at — what time is it?"

"It's eleven-thirty."

"It's eleven-thirty at night because Ottawa and Minnesota went to double overtime and I have aged approximately four years in the last three hours. Brewer, tell the people what happened."

"Rozanov happened. That's what happened. The man has been playing like someone told him hockey was getting banned and this is his last chance. Eighty-two regular season games, forty-one goals, sixty-three assists, and a plus-minus that is frankly offensive to other hockey players. He's thirty-two years old. He is not supposed to be doing this."

"Okay but can we talk about Luca Haas for a second? Because I feel like people are sleeping on Luca Haas."

"Fourth season. Twenty-four years old. Looks like someone's mild-mannered neighbor."

"Plays like an absolute menace. That overtime goal — Brewer, he didn't even celebrate. He just skated back to the bench."

"Ice water. The kid is made of ice water. Ottawa's going to the second round, folks. They are very much a problem for everyone remaining in this bracket. We'll be back Thursday."

Spring came to Ottawa the way it always did — reluctantly, and then all at once. The canal thawed. The path Shane's dad had walked every morning for four months went from mud to dry stone overnight. Ilya ran it now. Early, before Shane was up, Anya beside him doing the thing she did where she ran ahead and doubled back as though checking that Ilya was still there, still coming, still hers.

His parents had gone home in March. His mom had cried once, briefly, in the kitchen on the last morning, and had then composed herself and made a list of things the refrigerator needed. His dad had shaken Ilya's hand at the door — the departure grip, both hands, held — and said "we'll see you at the games" and that had been enough. More than enough.

Marie had finished two weeks later. The threat assessment had come back clean — the blood game organizers in custody, Real Hockey gone, the consular watch called off by Global Affairs after the Russian diplomatic complaint went nowhere. Harris had delivered the news over coffee at the kitchen table. Ilya had thanked Marie, and stood in the front hall after she left and listened to the house.

Quiet. Just the house. Just them.

Jensen had stayed another week for the transition. On his last day he'd shaken Ilya's hand, and Ilya had said "thank you for having my six," and Jensen had said "It was a pleasure, Captain," and left. Ilya had watched the car go from the front window.

Then he'd gone back inside and made dinner.

"Okay, Hot Sexy Hockey, episode thirty-one, I'm Dani, she's Pauline, and we are DEEP in second round Centaurs content because

apparently this is our life now."

"I want to be clear that I came to this podcast as an Admirals fan and I remain an Admirals fan—"

"The Admirals were eliminated in five games. I bet they're missing Scott Hunter now."

"—and yet somehow I have a Hollander jersey."

"Say more."

"I don't want to say more."

"She ordered it at two in the morning after game three. I watched her do it. We were Face-Timing."

"It's a very good jersey."

"Okay so we have to talk about the Hollander-Rozanov two-man game because statistically it is doing something that hasn't happened since Lemieux and Jagr and I need everyone to understand how insane that sentence is. Their on-ice shooting percentage together this postseason is—"

"Don't tell me numbers right now I'm emotional—"

"Sixty-three percent, Pauline."

"I need a minute."

"And while you're having your minute — let's talk about Luca Haas! Because he's been the third piece of this thing and nobody outside Ottawa saw him coming."

"Fourth season. Quietly excellent. And then this playoff run he just — turned into something else entirely."

"He's got Rozanov's instincts. Not his style, not his flash, but the same reading of the ice. Like he always knows where the puck is going before it gets there."

"He's twenty-four."

"Oh my God, he's practically a wee baby."

"Pauline."

"I know."

The citizenship file moved. Not dramatically. An email from Melinda's assistant, a follow-up from the Minister's office, a date for the formal approval. Ilya read each message and then closed his phone and went back to whatever he'd been doing. He had learned in the last year that waiting was easier when you didn't watch it.

Martin called in April to confirm the timeline. Weeks, he said. The passport office had been notified. Ilya thanked him and hung up and found Shane in the kitchen making eggs and told him.

Shane stopped. Spatula in hand. He turned around.

"Weeks," Ilya said.

"Okay, then," Shane said.

He turned back to the eggs. Ilya watched him from the doorway — the shoulders, the set of his jaw, the way he was pressing too hard on the spatula. Ilya crossed the kitchen and put his hand on Shane's back, flat, and left it there until Shane's shoulders came down.

"Weeks," Ilya said again.

"Yeah." Shane's voice was rough. "Yeah, okay."

"Two Hockey Chicks, episode one-fifty-seven. I'm Sammy, she's Trix, and I want everyone to know I'm drinking chamomile tea right now because I cannot have caffeine before Ottawa games anymore. My cardiologist—"

"You don't have a cardiologist."

"My hypothetical future cardiologist, who I am going to need if this team keeps playing the way they're playing. Trix, the Centaurs are in the Conference Finals."

"They are."

"Against the Ducks."

"Against the motherflippin' Ducks."

"Wyatt stopped thirty-eight shots last night including a penalty shot in the third that I'm going to be thinking about when I'm on my deathbed."

"It was an unreasonable save."

"It was a save that had no business happening and yet it happened and Ottawa won 3-2 and I cried."

"You cry every game."

"I cry because they're GOOD, Trix. Can we talk about Troy Barrett? Because Barrett has been quietly having one of the best defensive postseasons in the league and I don't think people outside Ottawa understand what they're watching."

"He doesn't make it easy to understand. Three interviews this postseason, all of them about forty seconds long."

"He gives the game. That's all he gives."

"And it's enough."

"And Hollander — playing like a man who has something to prove, which, I don't know what more he possibly—"

"I think he's just happy."

"...yeah. Yeah, I think that's it exactly."

They clinched the Conference Finals on a Wednesday. Ottawa, home, the building coming apart at the seams. Ilya scored the winner in overtime — a shot from the circle that he didn't see go in, only heard, the sound of sixteen thousand people telling him what happened before his eyes caught up.

Shane found him at center ice. Always Shane at center ice. They'd been finding each other at center ice since they were nineteen years old and didn't know yet what that meant. Ilya knew now. He grabbed Shane's jersey and pulled him in and the crowd was enormous around them and it didn't matter.

In the locker room: Zane with a full bucket of something aimed at Wyatt, who saw it coming and dove behind Dykstra, who did not see it coming and took the full impact with the expression of a man deciding in real time how to feel about it. Wyatt was already filling a second bucket. The room was loud and wet and Dykstra was going to need a dry jersey.

Luca sat in his stall watching it with the mild patience of a man waiting for a bus. He had fourteen points in the postseason. He had not, as far as Ilya had observed, celebrated any of them with more than a nod. Ilya had watched him all season — the way he moved on ice, the read he had, the instinct that looked like calm because Luca had not yet learned to perform urgency. He would be very good. He was already very good. In four years he might be something that required a new word.

Barrett was beside him. Not laughing, not talking — forearms on his knees, eyes on the middle distance. Processing. Ilya caught his eye

across the room and Barrett nodded once, slow. That was enough.

Shane was across the room. He caught Ilya looking and held up two fingers.

Two more wins.

"Hear Me Roar, Conference Finals wrap-up. I'm Rufus, that's Janeway, and Roxy's got the board tonight.

"We've been doing queer hockey coverage since before it was a thing people wanted to hear. And I want to sit with that for a second. When we started this show, 'openly gay NHL player' was a hypothetical. A someday. A wouldn't-that-be-something.

"Now we're in the Conference Finals and the best player in the league kissed his husband on live television and fought the Russian government and testified before parliament and the most interesting thing about it — the genuinely remarkable thing — is that the hockey is better. He is better. Like something that was pulling against him for fifteen years finally let go.

"Roxy, you want to say it or should I?"

"He's free," Roxy said*. "He's just free."*

"He's free. And we are all watching what that looks like."

The envelope came on a Tuesday. A week before Game One.

Ilya was home. Shane was in the kitchen. Anya was underfoot, conducting her ongoing survey of whether the kitchen floor contained anything edible.

The doorbell rang.

The woman at the door had a scanner and a clipboard and the efficiency of someone with fifty more stops to make. "Rozanov?" she said.

"Yes."

"Sign here."

He signed. She handed him the envelope — thick, government-issue, the maple leaf in the corner — and was already moving back down the walk before he'd closed the door.

He stood in the hallway.

The envelope was not heavy. It felt like it should be heavier. A year of hearings and lawyers and parliamentary committees and pig's blood on the ice and his brother's silence and a cold kitchen floor in October — and the weight of it fit in one hand.

"Ilya."

Shane was in the kitchen doorway. He'd heard. He always heard.

Ilya looked at him. Looked at the envelope.

He opened it.

The passport was navy blue. Smaller than he expected, or exactly the size he expected, he wasn't sure. The maple leaf gold on the cover. His name inside — ROZANOV, ILYA GRIGORYEVICH — and his photo, which was not a flattering photo but was undeniably him, and below it: CANADA.

Nationality: Canadian.

He read it twice. Then he closed it and held it.

Shane crossed the hallway. He didn't say anything. He put something in Ilya's other hand — small, light. A little clay pot. A plant,

barely bigger than his fist, something green and stubborn-looking. A small Canadian flag on a toothpick stuck in the soil.

Ilya looked at the plant. Looked at Shane.

"It's a peace lily," Shane said. "They're hard to kill."

"Shane."

"I looked it up. They survive low light, irregular watering, they basically just — keep going. Even when you forget about them."

"Shane."

"They're Canadian now too, I figure. The plant and—"

Ilya pulled him in with the arm that had the passport in it and held on. Shane's hand came up to the back of his neck. Anya circled them twice, determined as always to be included in anything happening in the hallway.

Outside, Ottawa was in the Stanley Cup Finals. The Ducks were coming Thursday. The hockey world had its eyes on this city, on this team, on what happened when you gave a man room to be exactly what he was.

Inside, the house was quiet. The passport was navy blue. The plant was small and green and going to survive.

Ilya held on.